THE NEW

ADVENTURES

THE DYING DAYS

LANCE PARKIN

BBC

DOCTOR WHO

The New Adventures

The Dying Days

Written by Lance Parkin

6 May 1997: The Dying Days of the Twentieth Century

On the Mare Sirenum, British astronauts are walking on the surface of Mars for the first time in over twenty years.

The National Space Museum in London is the venue for a spectacular event where the great and the good celebrate a unique British achievement.

In Adisham, Kent, the most dangerous man in Britain has escaped from custody while being transported by helicopter. In Whitehal , the new Home Secretary is convinced that there is a plot brewing to overthrow the government. In west London, MI5 agents shut down a publishing company that got too close to the top secret organisation known as UNIT. And, on a state visit to Washington, the Prime Minster prepares to make a crucial speech, total y unaware that dark forces are working against him.

As the eighth Doctor and Professor Bernice Summerfield discover, all these events are connected. However, soon al wil be overshadowed.

This time, the Doctor is already too late.

CONTENTS

 Author's Preface/Introduction – Page 3

THE DYING DAYS – Page 6

Author's Notes – Page 125

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Bernice Summerfield created by Paul Cornell

The Ice Warriors created by Brian Hayles

2

Introduction - Preface by Lance Parkin

Conservative choices

Fans in high places

I've heard the same story from three independent sources. That doesn't make it true, but it makes it true enough that a newspaper editor would be more than happy to run it.

On May 1st 1997, on the night of the General Election, Tim Collins, newly-elected Conservative MP for Westmorland and Lonsdale and Doctor Who fan (he'd had letters published in fanzine DWB) sat in his local town hall, oblivious to the activity around him, frantically reading The Dying Days, 'because he wanted to have read all the New Adventures under a Tory administration'.

Over the years I've talked to hundreds of people, nearly all of whom remember exactly where they were when they finished it, some of whom have admitted to bunking off school or work to do so. I think, though, that Tim Collins wins the prize for best Dying Days related anecdote. He is now the shadow cabinet office spokesman and vice-chairman of the Conservative party, and he's on Sky News as I type this, calling for Stephen Byers' resignation.

Licence revoked

The end of the New Adventures

So … the basics. The Dying Days was the sixty-first and last New Adventure published by Virgin Publishing.

Virgin's licence to produce Doctor Who novels hadn't been extended because the year before the TV Movie starring Paul McGann had come out, and the BBC were keen to bring the books in-house.

At first, this was because there was a prospect of a TV series – but even when that evaporated, the BBC

recognised that Virgin had identified a niche in the market, and the books were nicely profitable (and just as important in an unpredictable market, had very steady sales).

The Dying Days was the first original novel to feature the eighth Doctor. It was original y published in April 1997.

Selling fast

Out of stock before release

Because it was both a ‘last’ and a ‘first’ book, it sold very quickly. The Dying Days was out of stock before the official release date. That’s led to reports and persistent rumours that the book had a lower print run.

No, no, a thousand times no: the book completely sold out, so I know exactly what the print run was. The irony is that it’s easily my biggest-selling Who novel – it sold more than Just War, Cold Fusion, The Infinity Doctors and Father Time. And it’s ironic, because for five years, now, second hand copies of The Dying Days have changed hands for a small fortune.

They’ve sold on eBay for over fifty times the cover price. There are plenty of copies out there, but the people that have copies cling on to them. So it’s rare that one comes up for sale.

Something special

Creating an 'event' book

I didn’t expect that when I got commissioned, but I knew it would be an ‘event’ book, and it had to be special. The editor of the range, Rebecca Levene (who for reasons best known to herself prefers to be called ‘Bex’), and I thrashed out some of the details.

With almost every Who book, the editor will give the author a couple of things that ‘have to happen’ – usually, these aren’t major plot points, just things to bind the range together. When I wrote Just War, I had to put a couple of hints in foreshadowing the death of Roz, one of the Doctor’s companions. With Father Time, there were elements of the ‘Earth arc’, like the physical state of the TARDIS.

The Dying Days was, essential y, a long list of ‘requirements’. It had to both be a fitting end to a range and the pointer to a new future... futures, actually – there was a new Doctor, but Virgin were continuing to publish books featuring Benny, and the book had to act as a showcase, maybe even an introduction, to her.

A view to a kill

Would the Doctor survive?

At heart, the book was designed as an affirmation of what Doctor Who was in the mid-nineties. A hymn to the fact that the books had moved things on, that we'd left Doctor Who in a better state than we found it.

It was also a unique thing – a 'last Doctor Who' story. A chance, like Dark Knight Returns or the Star Trek: The Next Generation episode Al Good Things, to put a capstone on the legend. And I could kill him. This was one book where the Doctor might not make it.

Movie madness

Shouting in a cupboard

Bex and I were also reacting against the TV Movie. I love the McGann movie. Bex was far less impressed. Both of us agreed it was a pretty poor 'pilot', in the sense that it didn't real y get across the essence of Doctor Who. But I saw some great ideas in there – and I loved the visuals, the sense of scale, Doctor Who in the style of Coppola's Dracula.

What it was missing could be summed up in one word: monsters. The threat was too abstract, the scale of the final confrontation – two people shouting at each other in one of the bigger TARDIS cupboards – was just not grand enough. This book was going to end in a pitched battle– man versus an army of monsters. And the Doctor would get to demonstrate steel – in the TV Movie, the Doctor's a passive figure, someone who's tied up, follows Grace around. You see the velvet glove, and it's a lovely glove, but there's no steel inside it.

Bex and I had a phone conversation where we agreed that the TV Movie should have been that typical Doctor Who plot: monsters invading contemporary London, using subtle ways at first, then an all out invasion. Then it struck me... in sixty previous New Adventures, that had never happened. Alien invasions, contemporary stories...

but never the two together.

Bex didn't believe it – "No Future... that was set in the seventies", "Damaged Goods... no, wait, that was the eighties". We'd been banging on about how the TV Movie should have done something that the books had never done. And we agreed there and then that was going to be our story.

Origins

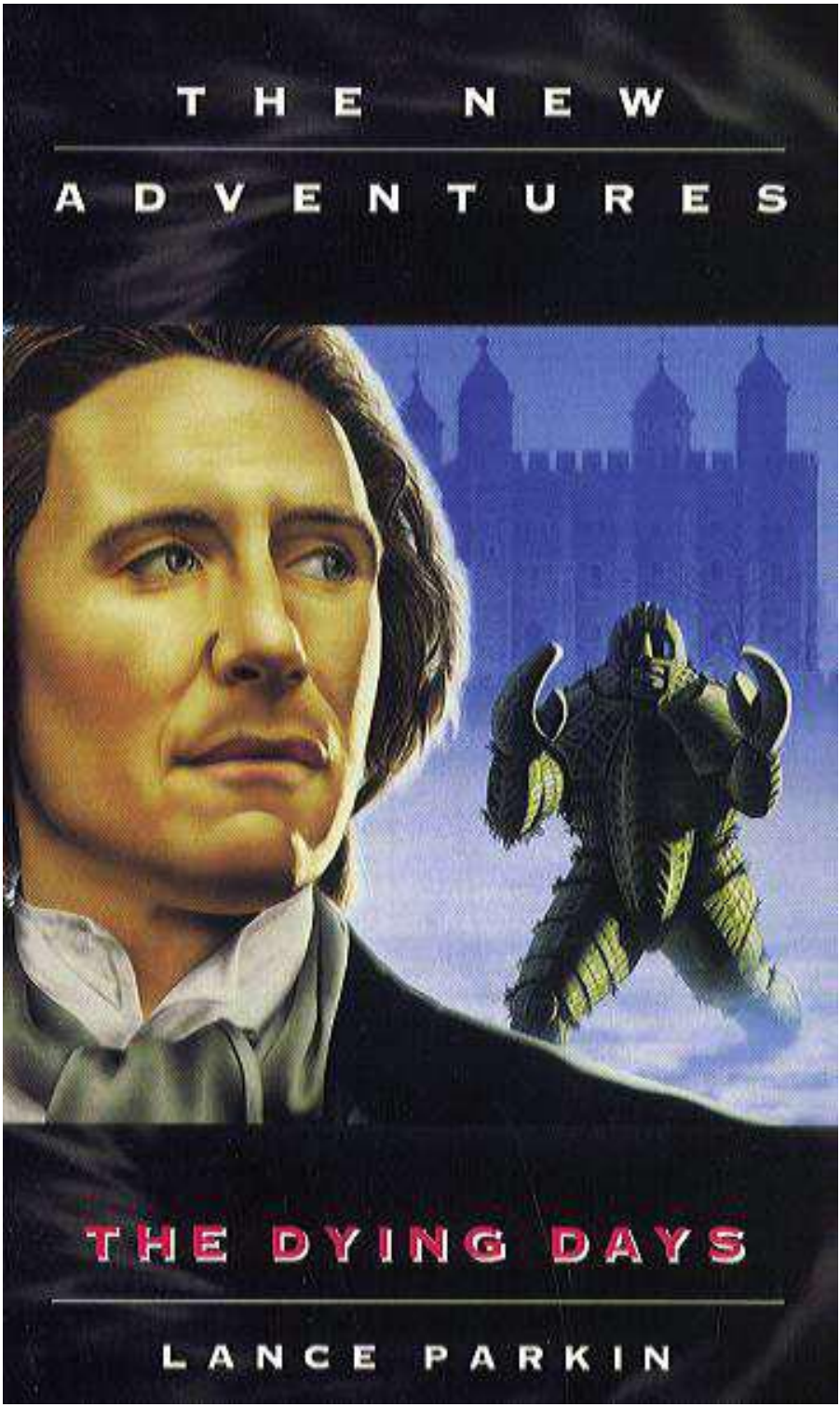
Pertwee meets Tom Clancy

By happy chance, I'd been toying with a Pertwee Missing Adventure proposal a couple of years before, while I'd been waiting to hear back about Just War. The basic concept – Pertwee UNIT story as Tom Clancy technothriller was just so fundamentally wrong that I could never get the book to work, but I did have a usable plot.

The book was called Cold War, and featured the Ice Warriors. In one page synopsis form, it's almost exactly the same as The Dying Days, although it would have been a completely different book.

The Dying Days is also about the end of the New Adventures era, and the passing on of the torch. In 1995, just after I'd been commissioned to write Just War, I joked that we were in 'the Rebecca Levene Golden Age of Doctor Who'.

No-one, least of all Bex, took the remark seriously. Five or six years on, the phrase pops up in internet discussion of the books completely unironically. There's even a word for it: NAstalgia.



Other influences

Links to War of the Worlds

The War of the Worlds was obviously a huge influence – how could it fail to be, with Martians invading the Home Counties? Some of the chapter titles are the same, and almost al the original characters were named after places or people in Wells' book. Both, for example, have an astronomer called Ogilvy.

Note that I do invert a few of the things from The War of the Worlds – germs don't kill the Martians in this, they're working for them! I saw Independence Day when I was writing Chapter Seven. As you'll see for yourselves.

The title took longer than the plot. All we could come up with were joke titles: Licence to Kill, Licence Revoked, The Morte D'Octor. We wanted something ominous, something that reflected the end of the New Adventures in fact as well as fiction. In the end, I decided to watch the Bond film Licence to Kill, partly out of sheer masochism, partly to pick up tips on how to kill a popular franchise. And there the title was, in the theme tune – The Dying Days.

Bex and I had got a story and we had a title. Which was just as well, because the lead time for the book meant I only had five weeks to write it...

Below: the original cover for **THE DYING DAYS**

5

C

hapter One

What We Saw From the Ruined House

Tuesday, May 6th 1997

The Doctor was late, as usual.

Professor Bernice Summerfield wouldn't mind, but he was a Time Lord. Not only did this mean that he could travel freely in the fourth and fifth dimensions of time and space, so he ought to be able to keep his appointments, it meant that he could always have popped back afterwards and left her a note saying he was going to had been late. He really had no excuse.

She resolved not to get too upset, and poured herself another cup of coffee. There were worse places to be than the Kent countryside in the dying days of the twentieth century. Kadiatu and aM!xitsa had dropped her off at the Doctor's house on Allen Road a week ago, on the morning of April the thirtieth 1997, the day before she and the Doctor had arranged to meet. Kadiatu had told Benny that they couldn't stay long without violating the non-aggression treaty between the People and the Time Lords. Benny and Kadiatu had used what time they had to drive down to Adisham to stock up on provisions. AM!xitsa stayed behind to keep an eye out for the Doctor, just in case he turned up early. The locals were used to them, now: they didn't turn heads at Mrs Darling's little corner shop, even when they tried to pay for a trolleyful of food with a single five pound coin.

Kadiatu had never been the easiest of people to strike up a conversation with, but this time she had been more taciturn than normal. She and aM!xitsa stowed away the provisions in virtual silence and soon after that their time machine vanished from the gravel driveway in a burst of colour and light that Benny's human vocabulary couldn't even begin to describe. Once she'd probably have envied them as they flew off into the unknown for another new adventure, but now she was quite content to spend a day on her own sitting in the overgrown garden of the Doctor's house, watching the birds chase each other around the treetops.

On that first morning she'd mopped down the wrought-iron garden furniture and brought out a couple of faded cushions from the living room sofa. She'd arranged them along the south side of the house, the one with the best view of the grounds, she'd put up a garden umbrella and then settled down to a day of serious relaxation. First, she had caught up with her diary. This was more important than ever, now that she'd final y persuaded a publishing company that there was a market for her memoirs. They'd paid her quite a big advance for the rights, so it only seemed fair that she should get around to sending them something.

She only wrote eight hundred words, none of them particularly enthralling ones, but managed to avoid thinking about Jason all day. Mid-afternoon she did catch herself congratulating herself that she hadn't been thinking about him, but concluded after some soul-searching that that didn't count.

When the Doctor hadn't turned up as arranged the next morning, Benny decided to spend a couple of weeks here in Allen Road before trying to get a lift anywhere else. She had quickly settled into a

routine. At half-seven she'd shuffle across to the other side of the double bed in the main guest bedroom, and then shake herself awake when she realised that her husband wasn't there. Every night for thirty-three years - with only about a dozen exceptions before she was married - she'd slept in a single bed, by herself, so why did she feel so lonely every morning now when she woke up and there was no-one lying alongside her? She toyed with the third finger of her left hand. For thirty-three years she'd not worn a ring on that or any other finger, why did she now miss the weight of one that she'd only worn for a few months? Musing on this kept her occupied for a couple of minutes, before she decided that angst wasn't her thing, and she really ought to get on with her life.

So, she'd get up, realise how chilly it was, pul her robe on and go down to the kitchen. The house was always a little too cold, regardless of the season of year or the time of day. So, when she'd prepared breakfast, she'd lay the pot and plates on the tray with The Haywain on it and take it outside into the sunshine. The next half-hour or so would be spent leisurely munching triangles of wholemeal toast and washing them down with the finest Sumatran coffee.

On the second day, she'd pul ed an old portable television from one of the guest bedrooms and set it down on the garden table. Locating an extension lead long enough to reach the socket in the kitchen had proved a little more tricky, but there had been one on a workbench in the garage. Most of the time she kept the sound down, content to glance across every so often at the flickering, two-dimensional, monochrome images of the world outside her walled garden. First thing in the morning, though, she'd twist the volume control up and listen to the headlines.

6

Today, an Irishman with a square head was sitting on a sofa with a grinning young woman. They were discussing the Prime Minister's visit to Washington, and there was much talk of 'forging links' and 'common ground'. Benny tried a little quiz on herself, but couldn't remember the name of either the Prime Minister or the President. Both countries had had an election in the last nine months, so it was tricky. It wasn't important.

She twisted the dial and managed to find another channel amidst the static.

' -fast News, coming live from the National Space Museum in London.

I'm Justin Webb. Today, Tuesday May the Sixth, Britain returns to Mars. It is over twenty years since the first missions to the Red Planet. We'll be asking former Minister of Science Lord Greyhaven whether this is the beginning of a new life on the final frontier or just an expensive waste of money. But first, here's Juliet with the headlines.' The picture switched to another chirpy blonde. 'Good Morning. The headlines today: at a speech from the White House lawn, the Prime Minister has - '

Benny turned the television off. A little aurora danced on the screen for a couple of seconds as the tube cooled down. It was eight o'clock, time to check the post. She stood, and made her way down to the lawn. In her bare feet, walking down the gravel driveway was out of the question. Cutting across the garden was also a shorter route. She stepped across the lawn, the long grass stil wet with dew. She made her way past the fountain, a piece of Victoriana that, like the tall greenhouse at the side of the house, had fallen into disrepair at some point over the last century. Rainwater had collected, and yesterday she'd seen tadpoles swimming about in there. There was no sign of them today.

Benny carried on walking, past the tulips, through the shrubbery and towards the gate. Every so often she'd look back at the house, hoping to see the TARDIS arrive.

The statue of the girl was still by the gates, hidden among the leylandia. It was life-size and dull grey, the colour of concrete. The subject was fifteen, at most, with hair that fell down her back. She wore a miniskirt and cropped jacket, one of her high heels was missing. Her face was set forever in an expression of terror, her arms were held out in front of her as if she was trying to keep something away. Benny didn't know which thought was more disturbing: that the Doctor had chosen to put the figure in his garden for aesthetic reasons or that it hadn't always been a statue. She certainly had no intention of asking him about it.

Benny reached the iron gates and checked the postbox. The first thing she found was The Mirror, which she stil hadn't got around to cancelling. Eschewing both the state visit to Washington and the Mars landing, the front page had decided instead to reveal that a voluptuous young woman (pictured in a white basque and stockings) was having sex with someone famous that Benny had never heard of. This, the headline declared, was a 'world exclusive'. A quick flick through the paper revealed that many other people were doing much the same. A couple of years ago, Benny would have tutted at the

demeaning and trivial nature of the stories, now she just felt the faint ache of jealousy, the belief that all the young people were off somewhere else having more fun than her.

Behind the paper there was a single letter. Benny frowned when she saw it. The envelope was dul grey, it was the type used for official communications in her native twenty-sixth century. Before she picked it up, she checked around but there was no sign of who had delivered it. There wasn't a stamp, there wasn't a postmark, there wasn't a corporate or military logo. The only thing printed on it was her name: PROFESSOR BERNICE SURPRISE

KANE-SUMMERFIELD. She looked at it for a moment. 39 characters, not including the hyphen. Opening the envelope and was rather shocked to find that it offered her the chair of archaeology at St Oscar's University on the planet Dellah. There was a reasonable wage, a rather generous research grant and free board and accommodation. The Vice-Chancellor looked forward to meeting someone of her repute. Benny read the letter again to make sure she wasn't missing some vital point, or perhaps the punchline. She had been given to understand that to get that sort of job, one had to apply for it. The date on the letter was March 2593 - almost a quarter of a century after her own time.

Somewhat preoccupied, she tucked the letter and the newspaper underneath her arm and set off. The journey back up to the house always seemed to take longer than the trip down. As it sat on the green grass below the clear blue sky, the house looked like a natural feature rather than anything man-made. Simultaneously it looked well-tended and half in ruin. It seemed quite small from the gates, but inside it was a labyrinth of empty bedrooms and dusty storerooms. She'd been dropping in for years, but Benny still couldn't think of the place as a home. The house had stood for centuries, but no-one had ever lived there for more than a couple of weeks at a time. It had compensated: filled its rooms and landings with the creak of floorboards and the rattling of pipes. Lying awake in the middle of the night, something she did every so often, Benny always got the impression that there were other people staying in the house. Not ghosts, or burglars: nice people.

By the time she returned to the house, Benny concluded that the Doctor wasn't turn up for at least another day, and had reconciled herself to another day of dozing in the sun. Perhaps later she'd try her hand at sketching: the orchard about a hundred yards to the west looked like a good prospect: recent storms had brought down a couple

of the trees, and made the woodland look terribly dramatic. There was a tin of pencils and a drawing pad in the living room. It would give her some more time to think about the letter from Dellah.

7

When she stepped back onto the flagstones, Benny realised how dirty her feet had become. She put The Mirror down on the garden table, propping it underneath the breakfast tray to stop it blowing away. Then she stepped inside to take a quick shower. The house was vast, but there was only one bathroom, which had been the cause of friction between the Doctor's travelling companions on more than one occasion. She remembered the last time: Roz had stood at the bathroom door, demanding to know how Chris could possibly take an hour and a half in there every day. Benny and ... Jason had ... they had both been woken by the sound of raised voices. They lay curled around each other in the upstairs bedroom, able to listen only to Roz's side of the argument, trying to stop each other giggling, but both their bodies convulsed with laughter at every terse insult that drifted up the short flight of stairs. They'd been pressed so close together that in the end they hadn't been able to distinguish which of them was laughing at which remark. They'd had to part, exhausted, and for the rest of the day, every time they made eye contact they couldn't help sniggering. Benny found herself smiling, even now, despite al that had happened since.

Another source of tension was the minuscule amount of hot water the house would allow every day. It was possible to get more, Benny had discovered, although you had to slap the brass tank that sat on the landing a couple of times to get it. When you heard the glup deep below in the bowels of the house, you'd know that you'd done it. It was the sort of valuable-trivial information that you kept from your housemates, and she'd not told anyone else about the trick. The brass piping, like the electrical wiring, was a little haphazard. Knowing the house's owner, Benny could well imagine how the plumbing had been installed a bit at a time over the centuries, on the basis of need, from junk the Doctor had found in the garage.

She reached the landing with the bathroom on it. A quick check of the tank revealed that it was just about full.

Benny stepped into the bathroom, leaving the door open, because she could. Experience had taught her to run the shower for a minute or so before stepping into it, so she stood on the cold black tiles waiting for the rattling pipes to catch up with her. Hot water soon began gushing

out. She slipped out of her robe and into the shower stall. After getting used to the temperature, she leant against the tiled wall, trying to prop herself upright while she soaped her foot. By the time she had the other one clean, Benny had decided to wash her hair.

She stood for a moment, facing out onto the landing, letting the water splash across her shoulder blades and run down her back. Without needing to look, she bent down and reached back until her hand located the tiny phial of herbal shampoo slotted into the shower rack. Benny unscrewed the top and massaged it into her scalp, working it up into a lather. Foamy bubbles ran down her neck and splattered to the floor of the shower unit.

The peace of the morning outside was disturbed by an unearthly wheezing, groaning sound that drifted through the half-open bathroom window.

'Isn't it always the way?' Benny observed, ducking her head under the water to get the worst of the suds off. You couldn't even rely on the Doctor to be unreliable.

She twisted the shower off, and scooped up her robe from the bathroom floor, pulling it around herself as she bounded down the stairs. Through the kitchen window it was possible to glimpse a solid blue shape outside on the patio, right by the garden table. Benny hurried out through the kitchen door, leaving a trail of wet footprints.

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The TARDIS stood there as if it had never gone away. The light on the top was stil flashing, and the grounds of the house were echoing with the sound of its arrival. Benny stood, looking up at it for a couple of seconds, soapy water dripping from her fringe.

The door opened.

'Sorry I'm late. You wouldn't believe the state of the traffic around the Horsehead Nebula.' The man who was framed in the doorway looked about her age, in his mid-thirties, perhaps a little bit older. He was about her height.

He wore a velvet frock coat that was probably a very dark green, but which might have been a plain-chocolate brown. Either way, it came down to his knees and underneath it was a wing col ar shirt, complete with grey cravat and a shiny patterned waistcoat. He was wearing baggy trousers, tan ones that had never even considered the idea of

having a seam. His long face was angular, with a jutting chin and aristocratic nose, but it was softened by a mass of dark brown hair that swept back down all the way from his high forehead to his broad shoulders. He had a full mouth and sad blue eyes.

'Doctor?' she asked, unsure why.

'Bernice!' he jumped forward, a broad open-mouthed grin on his face, and tried to hug her.

Benny took a step back, almost tripping over one of the garden chairs. The stranger pulled himself back. 'What's the matter?' he asked. His voice had a hint of the Doctor's Celtic lilt, but only a trace.

'What do you mean "what's the matter"? What do you think?'

The man paused, stroking his top lip as he considered the question. 'I've changed my appearance since we last met,' he concluded, with a faraway look on his face.

'Wel spotted. You've also started to go in for hugging. You know I don't like that.'

He fixed her with those eyes of his. 'We were alone in your tent, on a planet cal ed Heaven. The Hoothi had been destroyed. You were packing, ready to leave. There was a Japanese fan in your hand. I asked if we could be friends and put my hand on your shoulder. You asked me not to touch you. You said that I was very tactile, but you weren't and that you'd prefer it if I didn't.'

The Doctor put a hand on Benny's shoulder.

'I am the Doctor, Bernice. Your friend.'

She hugged him.

'You're wet,' he whispered softly.

'I was in the shower. Where's Chris?'

'Gallifrey. He stayed behind, but he said he might pop around to see you. A lot has happened to me since then.'

Benny yawned. 'It's been pretty damn action-packed here, too, I can tell you. I'll get dressed and tell you about it.'

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The helicopter maintained a steady 230 kph at 1750 metres altitude. From the ground it was a tiny black dot, making its way silently across the clear blue sky.

Inside, the guards didn't know who their prisoner was, not for certain, but they knew that he was a convicted multiple murderer and that he was to be considered dangerous at al times. They had been briefed about that before they had left, and given orders to shoot him if he even looked like he was trying to escape. There were four guards in all. The prisoner was handcuffed to one guard, with another, armed, man opposite. The prisoner wore dark blue coveral s, a uniform without pockets, belts or buttons, fastened by a single strip of Velcro down the front.

They'd searched him twice, once in his cell and again at the helipad.

The prisoner wasn't allowed to speak, but the noise of the rotor blades and the engines would have drowned out anything he said anyway. Everyone in the helicopter was wearing bright orange ear-protectors. Not a word had been spoken since the start of the flight, over an hour ago. The prisoner was in his early fifties, and was stil in good shape. He had the square jaw and bearing of a military office. His face was striking, with a chisel ed profile and distinctive eyebrows that darted up over his temple. It was one of those faces you were sure you'd seen before, in a colour supplement, perhaps, or on television. He sat in his harness, looking around with a keenness entirely lacking in his wardens.

Only Caldwell, the man in charge of the transfer operation knew who the prisoner was. In his day Alexander Christian had been notorious, but that day had long gone. The tabloids had plenty of other killers to vilify, and they'd forgotten about him in favour of the Yorkshire Ripper, Myra Hindley and Rosemary West. Every so often stories would leak out about the activities of those three, sparking off another little flurry of public interest. It had been twenty years since Alexander Christian had made the headlines, back when the men that were guarding them today were still at nursery school. Caldwell wondered if they'd even heard of him.

Caldwell sat at the front of the compartment, watching Christian carefully. He remembered what he had done, he remembered seeing the arrest on the news. Caldwell was nineteen at the time, in his first year at university. He'd sat in the common room with everyone else in

his hal , and seen every second of the coverage via the zoom lenses of The Passing Parade. This was the closest that the prisoner had got to fresh air since his conviction shortly afterwards. Knowing what he did, Caldwell was not comfortable sharing a confined space with Christian.

The helicopter lurched, sending Caldwell sprawling, despite his harness.

The pilot was cal ing something into his radio: 'May Day! We're losing altitude. There's a problem with one of the engines. May Day!'

'Let me help, Caldwell, old chap.' The prisoner was leaning over Caldwell, shouting over the noise of the engines,

'I'm a pilot.'

'One of the best,' Caldwel replied. It was a split-second decision: 'Let him out of those cuffs, he's our only hope.'

The guards looked at each other. The cabin lurched again, pitching them al over.

'Do it!' Caldwell shouted. He looked straight at the prisoner. 'If you try anything, Christian, you're dead, do you understand?'

The prisoner nodded. The guard handcuffed to him undid the lock, releasing his wrist. Christian clambered across to the cockpit, the guards parting to let him through.

He didn't bother clipping in his harness. 'What's the rate of fall, skipper?'

The pilot didn't have time to be wary of him. 'Ten metres a second. We're currently at one seven five metres.'

'That's about five hundred feet, right?' he grinned. He checked the oil pressure and rate of fuel loss.

The engine missed a beat, then another.

9

'Can you do anything?' Caldwell shouted.

'I can keep her upright.'

'Anything else?'

'I can try to crash this crate without killing us all. Hold on, everyone!'

***

Benny was up in her room, unsure what to think.

She towelled herself down, and fished around in the wardrobe for her chinos and a black T-shirt. Then she moved over to the window, careful y unlatching it. She knelt on the bed, leaning her head out. The Doctor was sitting on her garden chair, totally immersed in some cartoon on the portable TV. The picture was in colour, she realised. He had a cup of coffee in his hand, and would occasional y sip from it. He didn't seem to have a care in the world. He hadn't asked after Jason, but Benny sensed that he already knew that she hadn't seen her husband for months.

That had been the same time she'd last seen the Doctor and a lot had happened since then. Benny wondered if Chris had left before or after the Doctor had regenerated.

On Heaven, in her tent, the Doctor had pleaded with her. Ace had just left him. His voice was trembling and urgent at the same time. He couldn't travel the universe fighting monsters alone, he had told her: the magic dragon couldn't be brave without the little boy. Without his companion, he had nothing to be brave for. In that moment, Benny had seen the real Doctor. Behind all the tricks, behind al the plans and dark expressions and all his righteous indignation there was a little man who thought the universe ought to be a friendlier place. Dorothee had never seen that, or if she had she hadn't understood it. She'd have laughed: 'Yeah, sure, Professor, everything would be great if we were all nice to each other. Very profound'. It's easy to be cynical, but it's hard to be nice. The Doctor had been a man who once in a while needed protecting from the universe he was protecting. The Doctor needed looking after, he wasn't carefree. And he certainly didn't have sex appeal and boyish charm.

And now that little man had gone forever. The new Doctor looked up at her and waved, grinning. Benny smiled back, trying not to look like she was spying on him.

Suddenly he was on his feet, peering up at the sky to her left, shielding his face with his hand. She couldn't crane around enough to see what had grabbed his attention.

'Come down!' he shouted up at her.

There was a clattering fil ing the sky, and a droning underneath it. It shook the pictures hanging on the staircase wall, it rattled the crockery in the kitchen. It sounded like an aircraft in trouble. Benny bolted out of the door. As she reached the Doctor, the windows were rumbling, the sky was full of noise and a near gale force wind was blowing.

A shadow fell over the house and a vast black helicopter almost clipped the roof. Warm, gasoline-rich, air blasted down, pitching the garden umbrel a over and forcing her and the Doctor to cover their faces. As their clothing whipped up, the aircraft passed over them, trailing thick black smoke. It was streaking towards the orchard, but al the time it was losing height. The orchard was on raised ground, and Benny realised that the helicopter was going to crash, and that nothing that she or the Doctor could do was going to stop it.

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The whine of the engines, the clatter of the rotors, the screams of the men, the snapping of branches all merged into a solid wall of noise. They were flying through trees, each impact slowing them down but breaking them apart.

One of the guards tumbled past Caldwell, his limbs flailing like a crash dummy's. Oxygen masks, medical kits and emergency supplies showered from the overhead compartments, trapping Caldwell in his seat, catching him on the side of the head, and perhaps even breaking one of his legs.

The helicopter ground to a halt, the front end pitching upwards. The lights had failed, the cabin would be in darkness if it wasn't for the sunlight streaming in from the cockpit. For a moment there was silence. Then Caldwell heard the sound of movement above him.

His gun was in his hand by the time the prisoner appeared framed in the sunlight, but Caldwel found that it was too heavy to lift. His forehead was bleeding, he realised, where a metal box from the overhead locker had caught him.

Christian was kicking at something in the cockpit, something Caldwell couldn't see. The impact was enough to shake the whole of the helicopter, or what was left of it. They were the only two people left alive, Caldwell instinctively knew that. Christian wasn't even hurt.

He tried to say something, but was too weak.

Out of his vision, the cockpit door slammed open. Caldwell heard Christian scramble out of the cockpit and down the fuselage of the helicopter. He heard a pair of heavy boots crunch down into the soft earth outside. Caldwell tried to move, but he couldn't.

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10

The Doctor tried to keep pace with Bernice as she raced towards the woods. A vapour trail was scored across the sky, a thick black line pointing the way to the crash site. There was a column of smoke rising up the edge of the orchard, but there hadn't been an explosion. Now they were through the wicket gate, it was only a hundred yards across an open field to the crash site.

A rabbit hopped out of his way, no longer concerned by the devastation strewn around its habitat. The helicopter had hit the hil side at an angle, doing an equal amount of damage to itself and the orchard. It had punched a hole through the woodland, leaving everything else unscathed. As he and his companion entered the new clearing, the Doctor could trace its bone-jarring path down. The rotor blades had sliced the treetops before cleanly breaking off

- as they were designed to - and embedding themselves in the thicker trunks.

The fuselage had continued hurtling forwards, even with the rotors gone, but had become tangled in the branches.

The main body of the helicopter had twisted its way through the large trees before dropping to the earth. By the time it reached the bottom it hadn't been travelling very fast: virtual y all its momentum had been absorbed by the trees. The air was full of the smell of charcoal and burning rubber. It had pitched diagonal y, with the port side higher and the cockpit highest of all. The port engine, the one that was now facing upright, wasn't fully ablaze, but smoke was billowing out of it. The ground was littered with pieces of twisted metal.

'Mind your feet, Bernice,' he warned.

The cabin was lying on its side, almost intact. The helicopter had been black, and was unmarked. Even in its current state, the Doctor could see that it was a military transport, a Puma, or perhaps a 212. That could mean that there were fifteen people in there. He clambered hand-over-hand past the hot engines to the cockpit, which was

towards the top of the wreckage. The door was already open.

Bernice was twenty-five feet below him, examining the contorted remains of the tail. She seemed a little distant.

When his companion had spoken to him, back at the house, she had heightened that accent of hers: the pronunciation was ever so slightly better, she would tilt her head a little as she spoke and draw herself up to her full height. It was the way she spoke to strangers.

'Come up and help me,' the Doctor insisted cheerfully.

'I'm isolating the electrics from the fuel supply,' she said, 'to prevent an explosion. I'll be with you in a moment.'

'Good thinking.' The Doctor pressed himself to the cracked cockpit glass. There was a dead man in the cockpit, his eyes staring ahead, his neck broken. The Doctor tried peering past him down into the cabin. It was dark: the lights weren't working, of course, but neither was the emergency lighting. He suspected that Bernice would find that the electrics were already off. In the murk of the main cabin, the Doctor could discern what looked like someone's leg. It wasn't moving, and there wasn't a sound coming from interior of the helicopter. The Doctor eased himself over the lip of the door, and dropped down into the pilot's seat. The floor beneath him lurched a little under his weight.

Now that he was inside, the Doctor could see the bodies strewn below him, across the cabin. Seven people, most with broken necks. If he had doubted that this was a military 'copter then one look into the cabin would have confirmed it. The decor was gloomy, with equipment hanging from rails or stored in functional metal boxes. Most of the men were still secured in their webbing belts.

The Doctor climbed down into the wreckage, checking the pulses of the men. They wore black uniforms, and looked like military police. The floor was littered with metal and plastic containers, making it difficult to move. He also needed more light. On one of the bulkheads along the starboard side of the aircraft, the side that was pitched over to face the ground, there was a sliding door. The Doctor tried to release the handle, but it was jammed shut -

the fuselage must have twisted in the crash. The sonic screwdriver released the mechanism, and a couple of swift tugs got the door moving.

Bernice was standing underneath the door, and she helped slide the door al the way open.

'Don't come in,' the Doctor advised her, ducking back inside.

'Is anyone alive?' she called up, biting her lip.

'I don't think so. I'm double-checking.' It was certainly too late for the two nearest the door with their heads lol ing over their chests. Another had been impaled by a support strut that had broken loose. A third bore all the signs of a heart attack.

The fourth was alive, barely. The Doctor cradled his head.

'I'm the Doctor,' he said, 'what's your name?'

'C-caldwell,' the man coughed. He was about forty, with a neat moustache. He was in civilian clothes, a smart single-breasted suit, not the military police uniforms of his colleagues. 'Christian,' he continued.

'Caldwel Christian?' the Doctor asked softly, unsure if that was what the man meant.

'Christian escaped. Soil.'

11

'All right. You're going to be al right.' Speaking was clearly too much of an effort, but he was conscious, and breathing. The Doctor tried to make him comfortable. all the time being careful not to disturb his neck or spine.

The mistake people made in these sort of accidents was to try and move the patient. The Doctor cleared some of the wreckage from the man's lap.

'You've found someone alive?' Bernice was clambering in, bringing up one of her long legs for leverage. The helicopter rocked a little as it tried to cope with her moving around it. Once inside Bernice needed a moment to compose herself in the face of so much death, but she was soon looking around the compartment.

She located a plastic box with rounded corners, the size of a small suitcase.

'Could you pass me your sonic screwdriver when you have a moment?'

she asked, clearly not wanting to interfere with his first aid attempts. There was little more that he could do for the moment but stay with the injured man. The Doctor tried to keep one eye on his patient and one on what Bernice was doing.

A couple of well-aimed squirts of ultrasonic energy released the clasps. Bernice opened up the case.

'Test tubes,' she announced, lifting up the case to give the Doctor a better look. 'Full of red stuff. I can't see any hazard warning stickers, but if you don't mind, I'm not going to unstop them.'

'Soil,' Caldwell croaked.

The Doctor could hear a siren outside. 'An ambulance is coming,' he said.

Bernice was closing up the case and heading for the door. 'I'll go down and tell them,' she said, jumping down.

The Doctor squeezed Caldwel 's hand. 'You're going to be fine,' he assured him.

Caldwell gurgled his relief.

Car doors were slamming outside. He could hear Bernice saying something, then male voices replying.

After a moment, a uniformed policeman was poking his head through the doorway. 'Good morning, sir,' he began in a gruff voice, 'The young lady says that you have a survivor in here.' He was a craggy-faced man somewhere in middle age.

A policeman, presumably.

The Doctor pulled himself over to the door, holding out a hand. 'His name is Caldwell.'

The policeman shook his hand, but was looking past him. Not at Caldwell, but at the plastic case that contained the test tubes.

'If you could get clear, sir, we'll see to him now.'

'He's got a broken leg and he's in shock. He's almost certainly got concussion, too. Try not to move his neck.'

'No need to worry, sir, I'm fully-trained.'

He helped the Doctor back down to the ground. Bernice was standing half a dozen yards away by the police Range Rover, her arms folded over her chest. The Doctor crossed over to her. Most of the smoke from the crash had dispersed now.

There were only two policemen. The gruff-voiced one beckoned over his colleague to give him a leg-up into the helicopter.

'Stay here,' the other officer said, flicking his half-finished cigarette to the ground, 'we'l need to talk to you.'

'Well, he could have said please,' the Doctor remarked, grinding out the cigarette butt with the heel of his shoe. It wouldn't do to start a forest fire. He turned to Bernice and smiled. She smiled back, weakly. She looked different to the way he remembered her. It wasn't the face: the high cheekbones and wide mouth were just the same. Her eyes were still blue, her hair was stil black, cut in a close crop.

The Doctor rubbed his chin thoughtful y. 'Have you shrunk? You don't seem as tall as I remember.'

'You grew,' she replied impatiently.

The Doctor considered the answer for a couple of seconds. 'That would certainly explain the discrepancy,' he decided.

She handed him back the sonic screwdriver. 'Can we go now?'

He pointed over the helicopter. The first policeman had disappeared into the cabin, the other was talking to his colleague, with his back to them. 'That gentlemen asked us to stay.'

'Before you came over he was threatening me with the Official Secrets Act. Do you fancy trying to answer a set of awkward questions? "Who are you?", "Where did you come from?", that sort of thing.'

The Doctor broke into a grin. 'When you put it like that, no. I think we've done all we can.'

12

They strolled away, trying not to look back, quickly reaching the edge of the woodland. Over a low hedgerow was the field between the orchard and the house.

'There was something odd about them,' Bernice said as she clambered

over the stile.

'They weren't real policemen,' the Doctor informed her, helping her down.

She hesitated for a moment before jumping down. 'What? I mean how do you know?'

'Didn't you notice?' he pressed her.

There was a pause. 'Let's just say for sake of argument that I didn't.'

The Doctor sighed. 'If they were real Constabulary of Kent policemen they would have shown us their ID. They certainly wouldn't be smoking at the scene of an accident. And if they were responding to an emergency call, they would have sent uniformed officers.'

'I took the registration number of the Range Rover. P876 - '

' - XFL,' the Doctor completed, beaming. 'Almost certainly a forged plate, but worth looking up.'

'What's going on here, Doctor?'

'I don't know.'

'I mean really.'

'I mean really,' he objected.

She straightened up. 'You real y mean that, don't you?'

The Doctor smiled helplessly. 'Yes Bernice,' he laughed, 'I real y mean that I really mean it. Obviously it's got something to do with whatever's in that test tube. Caldwell said it was "soil". The policeman I talked to seemed a great deal more interested in the test tubes than in the injured man. Caldwell also said "Christian escaped".'

'It seems a lot of trouble to transport soil around,' Bernice muttered. 'If only I'd pocketed one of those test tubes when I had a chance we might have some clue.'

The Doctor smiled. 'Well, as a matter of fact...' He held up the test tube he had palmed earlier. 'We'll analyse it in the TARDIS labs. After you've had your breakfast and finished your shower, of course.'

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Elsewhere, a telephone rang. It was picked up after two rings.

'Alexander Christian has escaped,' a gruff voice said, 'The helicopter crashed.'

There was a moment's pause.

'The specimens?'

'Recovered from the crash-site.'

'Understood.' The handset was replaced.

13

C

hapter Two

Foreign Soil

Alexander Christian stood perfectly still on the patio, catching his breath. He'd half-run, half-crawled the hundred or so yards to the house, the nearest man-made structure.

It was a big place built in the last century, but now in some state of disrepair. The gardens were overgrown.

Christian had seen the owners, a couple in their thirties, hurrying over to the crash-site. He'd ducked down in the long grass and they'd run straight past him. The police Range Rover had missed him completely, driving up a dirt track fifty yards away to the south. His first five minutes of freedom had proved a success.

Judging by the furniture, the man's clothes and the "police box" sitting by the kitchen door, the owners of the house were Victorian enthusiasts. This eccentricity seemed to extend to not owning a telephone: he couldn't see a cable leading into the house. They didn't mind electricity, though: a portable television sat on the garden table. A young woman was dancing around in front of a couple of puppets. In the bottom right-hand corner was a digital clock reading 8:23. Christian watched the spectacle, fascinated, for a couple of seconds. How long had they been broadcasting television at this ungodly hour?

The owners had been in the middle of breakfast. There was a tray next to the telly loaded up with a plate, a butter dish and a coffee pot. Christian lifted up the tray and plucked out the newspaper

underneath. The Mirror. He scanned the header for the date: May 7th 1997. Price: 30p. Page-three girls had made it to the front, he noted. It was only a matter of time. More interesting was that the picture was in colour and that the newsprint didn't come off in his hands. Man hadn't reached Venus in the last twenty years, but clearly some things had improved.

There were more sirens: fire engines, ambulances, perhaps more policemen. He needed to get away from here. It would only be a few minutes before tracker dogs were brought in and there would be roadblocks in a ten-mile area within half an hour.

Christian tried to prioritise: he needed civvies, antiseptic for the cut on his head and to make a single phone cal .

He glanced up at the police box. Even if there was a telephone behind that hatch, calling the nearest police station was not the wisest move. He'd need to find a pay phone, and he'd need some change for it. The paper cost five times what it used to, so the phone probably did too.

Clothes, antiseptic and some 10p pieces. All three items should be in the house.

If the couple who lived here had children they'd be heading to school by now. There might be other people living or staying here, but there was no evidence of them. Christian knew he'd need to be careful. He had a couple of advantages, the main one being the element of surprise: the owners didn't know they had an intruder. He should be able to keep hidden, even if they came back. If not, he'd be able to overpower them.

Clothes and change: Bedroom. Antiseptic: Bathroom.

Christian kept hold of the newspaper and stepped through a dilapidated wooden door into the kitchen. One hi-tech item sat incongruously amongst the pre-war range and an old tin bread-bin. It looked like a TV set, but a nameplate said it was a microwave oven. Everything else looked like it had been sitting there undisturbed since the fifties. The kitchen lino was faded, and curling up at one end of the room. Christian began searching the drawers and cupboards. He briefly considered taking a bread-knife, for self-defence, but decided not to. He'd not taken a gun from the helicopter, either. He assembled the most basic of survival kits: a box of sugar cubes, a candle and a handful of the matches from by the cooker, a couple of black bin bags and one of the bars of chocolate from the refrigerator. After a quick

search, he couldn't find any salt or tea bags.

He heard the wicket gate swing shut. They were back. Christian stuffed everything he'd col ected into a plastic carrier bag and moved deeper into the house. There was nothing in the hall except doors to other rooms and a staircase. The bathroom and bedrooms would be upstairs, so he had no choice but to climb. Every step squeaked as he made his way up. Outside Christian could hear their voices: she was a Home Counties gal, her husband's accent was harder to place.

'I'll wait for you here,' the man said.

'Won't be long. Oh, Doctor, it looks like we've run out of bin bags.' She was inside the house as Christian reached the top of the first flight of stairs. He was halfway up the second flight when she began climbing up after him.

Christian reached the landing. A big water tank sat in one corner, but it wasn't big enough to hide behind. There were three doors and another, shorter, flight of stairs up. One door was open: to the bathroom. The other two were closed. Why was she coming upstairs? Chances are it was to have a wash or to use the loo, so she'd be heading for the bathroom, but the woman could just as well be looking for a book, her make-up or an item of jewellery, so she'd end up in her bedroom.

Christian chose one of the bedrooms, hoping she'd pick the other. He closed the door behind him. The curtains were drawn back, the sheets were freshly laundered and neatly folded: this was not the room the owners slept in.

It was someone's room, though, a teenager's judging by the model aeroplanes hanging over the window. There was a glass ashtray on the windowsil - it contained a handful of change and a couple of small keys.

The woman reached the landing. Christian ducked behind the bed, but as he had expected, she carried on up the short flight of stairs. Christian started to breathe again, and checked the wardrobe. There were about a dozen items in there, mostly T-shirts, but thankful y they were in adult sizes, in fact they would fit a chap even bigger than he was. One of the T-shirts bore a slogan that made Christian laugh: 'My Friend Went to San Francisco and All He Got Me Was This Lousy T-shirt'. Another one read 'It's Pronounced "Cwej"'. Christian pulled out

the smart grey suit and cotton shirt that hung at the other end of the rail.

The ceiling above him creaked as the woman moved about upstairs.

Christian ran his finger very slowly down the seam of his coveralls. The Velcro parted silently, but it seemed to take an age.

The woman was coming back downstairs as Christian stepped out of his prison uniform. He crouched behind the bed, pul ing the suit trousers down to him, but she walked past the door. He waited a couple of seconds, but the woman didn't go back downstairs. Instead he heard pipes rattling, and a shower splutter then burst into life.

Christian pulled the trousers on, and half-buttoned up his shirt. He took the provisions he had taken from the kitchen and distributed them around the pockets of the jacket. He slipped the jacket on and tested that the weight of the items was evenly spread-out and that nothing rattled when he moved.

He moved back over to the windowsil . Out across the rol ing country, the straight line of the A2 was visible, sunlight glinting off the windscreens of a string of cars. There was also a good view of the woodland from here: the crash-site had been surrounded by emergency vehicles. Shouts and engine noises drifted across the fields from time to time. Their efforts seemed concentrated towards the crash itself, no-one was looking for him yet. It was only a matter of time. He plucked fifty pence in change from the ashtray. The coins were odd, and at first he thought they were foreign. The five and ten pennies were smaller, there was a twenty pence piece that was a peculiar shape.

Christian tiptoed over to the door. The shower was still running, he could hear the woman moving around underneath it. He pulled down the bedroom door handle, guiding it open with his other hand. Then he edged forward.

The bathroom door was wide open.

Christian could have frozen, but he didn't, he carried on past the doorway and down onto the first of the stairs. He tensed, prepared to grab the woman when she came to investigate. Only when he was ready for that did he allow himself to piece together what had happened. He'd glimpsed her: the first woman he'd seen for nineteen years, in the shower stal , water dripping from her back and down the side of her breast. She'd been half-facing away from the door, bent

over to rinse off her hair. She hadn't seen him.

Christian wanted to talk to her, he wanted to explain things, to tell her the truth. He wanted to see her again. He hesitated.

The shower shut off. Christian lurched down the stairs, forgetting at first the noise the boards made when they had weight on them. He reached the bottom without a plan. He had a minute to collect his thoughts: the woman was going to have to dry herself and get dressed before she came down. He couldn't get out through the kitchen door, the husband was out there. He opened up one of the other doors and discovered that it led down a short corridor into a hal way. Christian followed it, finding the front door just as the woman was coming downstairs.

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'A coup? I find that very difficult to believe, Home Secretary.'

'That's what this information suggests to me, H. There are elements within society that are planning the overthrow of the British government.

'Call me Veronica,' the Director General of MI5 replied sweetly.

'Ha ha,' the Home Secretary chuckled. The man was an idiot.

Home Secretaries tended to be idiots, Veronica Halliwel reflected, or they wouldn't have accepted the job. There were three top cabinet posts below the Prime Minister himself, and nominally they were of equal rank. The Foreign Secretary flew around the world for free enjoying five star hotels and banquets at least three times a week. The Foreign Office staff and the network of Embassy staff did most of the actual work, and it was difficult to be unpopular at home or with your party unless you accidentally started a war, which happened, but not that often.

The Chancellor of the Exchequer had ultimate control of the economy. He set the levels of interest rates and taxation, and he also had the final say on public expenditure. That meant that he could tell his Cabinet col eagues exactly how much money they had to spend that year. It also meant that he'd retire to a dozen directorships of top London banks and financial institutions. He would be unpopular during a recession, popular during a boom.

He'd general y win the respect of the party, who'd see him as 'firm but fair' and an ex-Chancel or usual y stood more chance of becoming Prime Minister than anyone else.

The third senior man, the Home Secretary, was in charge of all matters domestic. And that was the problem. The Home Secretary was the man who had to deal with every child murderer, escaped prisoner, dangerous dog, inner-city riot, drug dealer, illegal immigrant, terrorist, car accident, rapist and cracked pavement in Britain. None of the nice things. It was very difficult to do the job well, the best to hope for was to have a quiet time. There was no foreign travel, both wings of your party would gang up on you when something went wrong and the public blamed you personally every time they ran out of toilet paper. So anyone who wanted to be Home Secretary was an idiot.

The new head of the Home Office fitted the job description better than few before him. His file back at Five was a testament to mediocrity. David Anthony Staines had scraped his second at Oxford. He'd not been popular, although he had met his future wife there. She'd been a party activist, and he'd gone along to the meetings and fallen in with the in-crowd. He'd been secretary of the college party (there hadn't been a rival for the position). Then it was usual path: he stood as a candidate in unwinnable seats for a couple of years while he did his legal training and grew up a bit. He got his own practice the year before his safe seat, Eastchester West. At Westminster, Staines had quickly fallen in with Lord Greyhaven, and for some reason the old fool liked him. So he'd progressed up the party ranks. He'd managed not to acquire any Swiss bank accounts or mistresses, at least none that Halliwell could find, and so he'd got a reputation for "honesty". Now he held a senior cabinet post.

Staines held open the report at the last page, and pointed out each phrase as he came to it. 'Subversive groups operating in London. Security leaks in the press. Terrorism. An increase in gun-related crime. The riots last week.'

'Sir, there is nothing to suggest that these events are linked. There have been terrorist and subversive cells operating in London for over thirty years.'

'That's hardly a reassurance, is it Ms Halliwell? What are MI5 doing?'

'We've kept a lid on it,' she said firmly. 'We know who they are, we know where they are. The moment they do anything illegal we pick

them up.'

'Last year there was that book published that blew the gaffe on UNIT, I Killed Kennedy. Why didn't you stop that, then?'

'Policy has always been to let people write what they want about aliens and UFOs. There are so many cranks out there, so many children's stories, that no-one believes any of it anymore. We leant on the publishers and they changed the cover, altered some of the dates and promised not to print anything like it again.' Who Killed Kennedy had got close to compromising UNIT, but as one of the co-authors claimed he'd killed Kennedy himself by travel ing back in time it would have been counter-productive for the government to try to ban it. The last Home Secretary had understood that without Hal iwell having to explain it to him in words of one syllable. MI5 had made sure the book had been marked 'science fiction' and flagged it on their list of subversive literature. The name of everyone who had taken it out of a library or ordered it from a bookshop with a computerised ordering system had been filed away for future reference. Five had also kept track of the authors: James Stevens had gone to ground, but David Bishop was still in London.

Staines' head was agitating from side to side. 'It's not good enough. I want the publishers raided, to see what other top secret information they have, and I want the editors questioned by your people to see what they know. Shut them down, by midnight tonight. You will do that?'

'I will do it under the strongest protest and if I have written authorisation.'

Staines handed her two sides of Home Office notepaper, stapled together. Halliwell rolled her eyes. He had obviously made up his mind about what needed doing.

She gave him one last chance. 'Sir, ten years ago, the government made idiots,' a knowing emphasis on that word, 'of themselves over the Zircon project. Perhaps you don't remember, but I was actual y in Glasgow, helping to remove three vanloads of papers and film from the BBC offices. We went through the same farce again with State Secret last year. If you want to give these crackpots publicity, then go ahead.'

'Thank you, I will. Your attitude has been noted, Director General. I am also going to advise Cabinet that we will need to increase security

around the country. More police, tighter checks at airports, that sort of thing.'

'Sir, you can't unilateral y declare a state of emergency.'

'Ms Halliwell, there is no question of a state of emergency, I just want our people to be a little more alert. You agree that I am acting within my powers?'

The telephone rang, and Staines picked it up.

'Home Secretary,' he declared, redundantly.

An expression of concern crossed his idiot face. 'Yes, yes. Right.' He replaced the handset.

'Alexander Christian has escaped,' he announced grimly.

16

Benny and the Doctor stood at the top of the staircase that led down from the entrance to the main deck of the redecorated console room.

'Well,' the Doctor said breathlessly, 'What do you think?'

'It's very ... big,' Benny observed. 'Big and ... dark. It's very big and dark. It's very you, real y, I mean it.' She was tempted to ask the Doctor for a pair of binoculars, or one of those telescopes you get on the sea front. She didn't mind the TARDIS being bigger on the inside than the outside, but there were limits.

The Doctor was stepping down, indicating the interesting features with a broad sweep of his arm. 'I used the second control room for so long I got used to all that white, I have to admit, but this always was the original. It's just taken a little while for the alterations to be completed.'

He picked up a tricorn hat which sat on a bust of William Shakespeare. 'It's simply ages since I wore this,' he laughed, trying it on again. It didn't quite fit, which clearly amused him.

'So the rest of the TARDIS ... ?'

'Don't worry, your room's exactly as it always was. I'm not sure where it is now, I admit, but rest assured I've not touched a thing in it.'

Benny smiled wanly.

‘In here,’ the Doctor called from the far wal , opening and striding through the sort of door that castles had. Oh, yes, she thought, 'the sort of door castles had', a textbook description for an archaeologist. She engaged her brain.

At intervals along the wall of the control room, there were doorways surmounted by drop head arches. The doors bore lovingly hand-crafted iron scroll-work, but no visible handles, latches or locks. The control room as a whole was in the Decorated Gothic style, taking the form of a roughly hexagonal lierne vault.

The clustered shafts, niches and buttresses were typical of the style, but there was evidence of alien influence.

Illumination was provided mainly by candlelight. At irregular intervals the same swirling, circular design appeared inlaid into the marble floor or the iron and carved into corbels and bosses. Benny recognised it from her visit to Gallifrey, but couldn't remember what it was.

Benny ducked through the door, following the Doctor into the TARDIS laboratory. She couldn't recall ever visiting the room before, and certainly would remember it if she had, she thought: a cold, dark chamber stacked to its high-vaulted ceiling with cardboard boxes and scientific instruments. Four great wooden workbenches were arranged haphazardly towards the centre of the room. On one of these an elaborate construction of test-tubes, Bunsen burners, retorts, tubes and glass jars but if they had once contained colourful, bubbling fluids they had long evaporated away. Every piece of equipment seemed to come from another age, and she found herself trying to place every arcane item. She half-expected the Elephant Man to come lumbering out.

The Doctor led her along the maze of particle accelerators, oscilloscopes and lasers to the microscope section. He ignored at least two electron microscopes, a holographic magnifier and a dimensional revisualiser in favour of an antique brass microscope that he had clearly kept clean for years by lovingly polishing it. Either that or the day before yesterday he'd popped back a century or so and bought a new one.

The Doctor took the test tube from his pocket. 'A cork stopper,' he said.

'Is that important?'

He shrugged. 'It might be. The stopper is tight. This tube hasn't been unsealed for ages.'

He flicked the tube open and sniffed the contents. 'No discernible odour.'

He tapped the soil out onto a glass dish. It was red, with a texture somewhere between sand and clay.

‘It looks like cocoa powder,’ she observed.

‘Well it isn’t,’ he snapped. Benny swallowed, surprised by the strength of feeling behind the Doctor’s reply. She kept her mouth closed as the Doctor placed some more of the dust on a slide and put it underneath the lens. He poured a little more into another piece of equipment at the side of the desk and flicked a switch on its side. The box chugged into life, lights flashing on its surface.

Benny leant over. The dust looked familiar from somewhere.

The Doctor peered through the eyepiece of the microscope. 'It's not from Earth, that's for sure. Let's see: Fe2O3.3H20. Limonite. Hydrogenated iron oxide.'

Why was it making her feel nostalgic?

Tickertape spewed from the box at the side of the desk. Without taking his eyes away from the microscope, the Doctor tore the tape off. Then he straightened up to read what it said.

'Found only one place in the solar system - '

' - Mars,' the Doctor and Benny declared in unison.

'Wel done,' the Doctor said, a little awestruck. 'I worked it out by spectrographic analysis with access to one of the finest mineralogical databases in the universe. How did you know?'

'As you'd know if you'd read my first book,' Benny announced authoritatively, 'I made my reputation as part of an expedition excavating the tombs of the Mare Sirenum,'

'Those tombs are carved from spotless blue crystal,' the Doctor objected in a wounded tone of voice.

'There was soil like that in the egg chambers.' - Benny realised she was blushing - 'I was twenty-four and there was a lad called Tim in the same group. We spent a fair amount of the time rolling around together up there. That soil gets everywhere, trust me.'

'The odd thing is that it has been chemical y treated. The main question is, how did it get here?' The Doctor peered down at the sample, as though he was expecting it to confess the answer.

'That's no big mystery,' Benny said, 'Humanity has got to Mars by now.' Her knowledge of history was a little sparse in places, but the late twentieth century (or more precisely 1963 - 1989: The Kennedy Assassination to the Fall of the Berlin Wall) was one of her specialities. Within a couple of years of the Americans landing on the Moon, the British had put a man on Mars. It was al part of the superpower space race, with Britain still trying to play with the big boys. Like al races, it was over quickly and didn't really amount to much. The United Kingdom felt good about itself for a couple of years and put itself even further into debt. There were no significant technological or scientific consequences, and al anyone had to show for it in the end was about five hundred kilos of red rock and rusty soil. Most people in the nineties probably wouldn't remember the names of any of the Mars Astronauts. There were a couple of disasters towards the end, Benny recalled. Something to do with astronauts going mad. Hardly surprising when they spent a total of sixteen months in a tin box the size of a Transit van.

The Doctor drummed his fingers on the bench top. 'Yes, now you mention it they were mounting Mars missions when I was exiled here. I remember helping them out that one time.'

'There was a report on the television news this morning about a new landing on Mars.'

The Doctor grabbed her by the shoulders and stared straight at her. 'It's al coming together. It looks like we need to catch up with current affairs. Come on, Bernice, let's get back to the control room!' He leapt up and bounded for the door.

Benny glanced down at the little soil sample. 'Now look what a fine mess you've got me into,' she scolded it.

***

The policeman in the vil age had seen him, looked straight at him. Christian had been forced to smile back at him.

What else could he have done? Broken his neck in the middle of the street? The constable hadn't shown a glimmer of recognition. Later, though, when he saw the new 'Wanted' posters up at his station, he'd remember.

Freedom. After twenty years, Alexander Christian could hardly remember what it was like to walk down a street, to see the young girls in their colourful summer outfits and the birds landing in the trees. Children with ice cream, mothers with prams. Fashions had changed, of course, that's what fashions did. Other little things were different: the cars were more streamlined, with odd rounded fronts and there were radio telescopes on the side of some houses - no doubt the latest hobby, like he used to build crystal sets when he was a kid.

Christian had reached the little supermart on the corner of the main street. A sign on the door read 'Open Today As Usual'. He straightened out his jacket, trying to look respectable, then he walked in. The bell above the door jangled as he closed it behind him. An old woman was behind the counter, stroking a large white cat.

'Hello,' he said - a word he'd not used for a long time - 'Could you tell me where the nearest phone box is?' He scratched the cat's nose.

'There's a pay phone just there, behind you,' she replied cheerful y. The cat looked set to follow him over, until the woman caught hold of it. 'Stay here, Stevie.'

Christian thanked her and moved over to it. He checked the number for directory enquiries and then dialled it. Or rather he tapped out the number - the phone had buttons rather than a dial.

After a couple of rings, a young man's voice asked which name he wanted. Christian told him and there was a pause, punctuated by the clacking of a keyboard. The whole system must be computerised by now.

'I'm sorry, sir, I can't find that name.'

'It's double-barrelled. With a hyphen.'

'And you don't know the area?'

'No. There can't be many with that surname.'

'I'll just try again.'

A four-second pause, more clacking. The line was crystal clear.

'I've found it, sir, but it's ex-directory.'

'Ex-directory?'

'A lot of teachers are ex-directory, sir.'

Teachers? Well, it had been twenty years. 'Can't you give it to me? It's an emergency.'

'I'm sorry, we can't.'

'Can you give me the address?'

'We don't give out addresses. Security. You could be an escaped nutter or anything.'

Christian decided not to argue the point.

'Could you at least tell me the county?'

'No, I'm sorry.'

'OK.' He hesitated for a moment, racking his brains. 'Katherine, with a "K", the same surname.'

A different voice, a recorded one, rattled out a number, then repeated it. Christian didn't have a pen, he committed the number to memory. He cut the connection, got a dialling tone, then tapped in the phone number: 0122 69046.

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The Doctor was striding back towards the console, which in the new scheme of things stood on a hardwood plinth in the centre of the vast control room. Immense iron girders sprouted from the floor and arched overhead, forming a canopy.

Wolsey detached himself from a chaise-longue and jumped over for attention. The Doctor strolled past him, his attention fixed straight ahead. Benny bent down and scratched the tabby cat under the chin. He was almost embarrassingly grateful.

'Has he been neglecting you?' Benny asked seriously.

'Miaow,' replied Wolsey. The little cat was happy enough. Why wouldn't he be with al this antique furniture lying around from him to claw and leave hair al over? Benny noticed the question-mark umbrella gathering dust on top of a filing cabinet, and a shiver ran down her spine. Benny joined the Doctor, Wolsey trotting ahead of her, leading the way.

The Time Lord bounced around the console. After a second's consideration he chose one of the panels and began to flick switches and twist dials. As Benny stepped up to join him a holographic frame materialised at head height between them, filled with static.

'With this, the TARDIS can tune in to every television channel broadcasting on Earth at this moment.' The Doctor had his head down, trying to stabilise the picture.

'What, even the mucky ones?' Benny said, leaning forward. Image after image started to flash up on the screen, too fast to decipher all but a handful: the Pyramids; Dale Winton with Japanese subtitles; riots on the Falls Road; Greedo firing first; a smiling Xhosa woman; James Bond diving after a plane in freefall; tanks in the desert; Batman knocking out the Riddler with a 'KA-POW!'.

'I've established the search parameters.'

The picture quickly settled on one of the American 24-hour news channels. An attractive young blonde was standing in the morning sunshine introducing a pair of men somewhere between three and four times her age. Her voice and manner weren't quite as annoying as some of her contemporaries, and suggested that there was a lot more to her than hair lacquer and lip-gloss.

' -ermass and Patrick Moore, two of the leading British space experts from that pioneering era. Professor, if I could start with you: you must be very proud?'

He was in his eighties, the tweed suit he wore wasn't much younger.

'Must I? We could have done al this twenty years ago. Forty years ago. We chose not to: space is a Pandora's Box and we shouldn't open it until we've sorted out our problems down here. Think of all the setbacks, all those hundreds of millions of dol ars, roubles and pounds which exploded on launch pads, crashed into the sea or never come back from that void. Remember the dozens of people that died. Then you decide whether all this is worth it just to plant a flag in some radioactive rust. Space isn't the final frontier, you know. Earth is a

tiny planet, surrounded by an infinite night, and out there are unimagined horrors.'

He was waving his finger upwards by this point. The interviewer had been shrewd enough to give the Professor enough rope to hang himself with: by the end of his speech he was ranting and almost out of breath. He'd reduced himself to an indignant old fool, live in front of tens of millions of viewers. Benny glanced over at the Doctor, who was rubbing his chin thoughtfully.

'Mr Moore, do you agree? After twenty years away from space, why pour so much money into it now?'

Benny recognised the seasoned television performer, but even if she hadn't she would have admired the professionalism of a man who had been asked foolish questions by young journalists many, many times over the years. When he spoke, he paused between sentences, allowed everything he said to sink in.

'The Professor's views are well known. I disagree with the idea that mankind has ever been away from space.

Your American viewers won't know me. I present an astronomy programme for the BBC that celebrated its fortieth anniversary last month. Back when The Sky at Night started, manned space flight was still only the dream of people like Bernard, here. Since then, the moonshots, and the Mars missions have been and gone and things have seemed pretty quiet. But in reality, so much has happened in the last twenty years. Just think: you are only able to broadcast this programme across the Atlantic thanks to the communications satel ites that ring the Earth.

They may be less dramatic than the old manned mission, but the space shuttle and the Zeus and Ariane programmes have made local space travel a matter of routine.'

'But we've not been travelling to other planets anymore?'

'The Hubble Telescope and Voyager probes have allowed us to explore our little corner of the universe. Only last year we got the first sight of the surface of Pluto. Space research has concentrated on improving our life on Earth.

Satel ites monitor the environment. They help the rescue services.

Military satellites can tell us when a country is building weapons that they shouldn't be. Those things are a great deal more use to us than putting a man on the Moon.'

'So the question seems to be why are the British going back to Mars? Are they hoping to find little green men?' she laughed.

They were nearing the end of the report, Benny realised, and the reporter wanted to end on a lighter note.

'They are five million years too late for that, if they are,' the Professor snorted.

'The findings of the Mariner probes of the nineteen-sixties didn't rule out the possibility that Mars might support human life, but I'm afraid that ten years later the British astronauts and the American Viking unmanned probes proved beyond al doubt that Mars was a barren, radioactive world, at least now. There may have been primitive life, many billions of years ago, but I remain sceptical. Mars is the world most similar to ours in the solar system, but the only water is frozen solid as a rock in the polar regions. I'm afraid that any human being walking on the surface of Mars without a spacesuit would be blasted by radiation, frozen to death by the temperature and then he would suffocated by the lack of atmosphere.'

'Wel on that note, it's back to the studio. Thank you gentlemen. This is Eve Waugh, coming live from outside the Mars 97 Mission Control at the British National Space Museum, London, England.'

The picture cut back to a middle-aged man in the Washington studio.

'Thank you, Eve. We'll bring you coverage from London all day, including live coverage of the landing itself starting at 5am Eastern Standard Time.'

The Doctor tapped a control and the sound cut off.

'What do you think?'

'I liked his monocle and her hairdo, they're both good at their jobs. The Professor needs to switch to decaff, though. I've walked on the surface of Mars without a spacesuit, and I'm fine.'

The Doctor beamed. 'Most of Mars has been terraformed by your time, as wel you know.' He screwed up his face, trying to dislodge a memory. 'The National Space Museum is in Trafalgar Square.' He

paused. 'That's only a two minute trip by TARDIS.'

He set about the instruments again, rotating some big blocks on the navigation panel, pulling across a couple of switches and releasing the handbrake. The column that protruded from the centre of the console and carried on up as far as Benny could see began to hum, the mechanisms within it rising and falling with a familiar piston movement.

The Doctor moved in a way that was both manic and calm - suggesting that after centuries operating the TARDIS

he still wasn't entirely sure he knew which buttons he should be pressing. It was odd to see someone else at the controls. Odder stil to think that this man was the Doctor. He was in his element here, the tails of his frock coat flapping in time with the strands of his hair as he moved around.

Wolsey had found her again, and was brushing around her legs, keeping her between himself and the Doctor.

There was the familiar chime, deep below the console. At least that hadn't changed. This part of the procedure, at least, the Doctor could accomplish with a practised ease. He straightened up, staring into the central column for a second or two, then flicked the last few controls and applied the handbrake.

It was quite a trek to the door, now, though. Benny followed the Doctor to the exit. The doors swung open as they approached.

20

The pigeons scattered as they stepped out. Once again the TARDIS had managed to land in the middle of one of the biggest cities in the world without anyone noticing. The Doctor locked the door behind him as Big Ben chimed nine o'clock.

Bernice was walking on ahead, looking at the National Space Museum with an historian's eye. Perhaps she had heard about the controversy a quarter of a century ago when it had been built. The concrete and chrome building was striking, one of the most recognisable modern buildings in Britain, but that hadn't silenced the public outcry when it had been built on the edge of such an historic square. It stood out even now, when a whole generation had grown up with it there. A huge red banner flapped above the door declaring 'MARS 1997'. Below street level was Mission Control itself. Of course the Mars 97 rocket

hadn't blasted off from central London - the launch itself had taken place in Oxfordshire, but it had all been co-ordinated from here. The roof bristled with satellite dishes, aerials and antennae, but all of them were part of the architecture, just as a medieval cathedrals managed to blend guttering and structural necessity with decoration and aesthetics.

The Doctor left Bernice behind, crossing the busy road and jumping up the steps, two at a time. When he tried the door, it wouldn't open.

'It's closed until ten-thirty,' an American voice informed him.

The Doctor turned to see a young woman winding up her microphone cable. She and her cameraman were packing up their equipment. Her two interviewees had disappeared.

'Eve Waugh. I've just seen your interview - well done, I know the Professor and he's a bit crotchety nowadays.'

She was shorter than she looked on television, but also a bit more willing to smile. 'Thanks, but I've faced worse.'

'Of course: your work during the Mexican War. I saw that, too: you saved a lot of lives, exposed a lot of evil men.'

She frowned. 'You have me confused with someone else. Wait a minute, how did you see my interview? It was only broadcast in the States.'

Bernice had finished her quick survey and had crossed over to join them. 'Hel o, Doctor. I see you've made a new friend.' She held out her hand. 'Professor Bernice Summerfield.'

'Eve Waugh. Yeah, I know: my folks were big fans of his, particularly Brideshead.' She looked Bernice up and down. 'So you're a Professor? And you are Doctor ... who?'

'Quite,' the Doctor nodded sagely.

'This museum doesn't open for another hour and a half,' Bernice interrupted. She was looking at the little card in the door.

'You academics should read your invitations,' Eve suggested. 'I'm going to be there, but I've got plenty to do before that - change into my gown for one thing. So, see you at ten-thirty,' she flashed them both a smile. 'Ready Alan?'

Her bearded cameraman nodded, but didn't say anything. Together they descended the steps.

Bernice waited until they were out of earshot. 'Nice woman. Right - so it looks like we've got to go back to the TARDIS and hop forward an hour and a half.'

'Time doesn't work like that. Now we're here we'l have to find something to do for ninety minutes. And we're not going to sit around in the TARDIS when we could be exploring this city.'

'Now why did I know you were going to say that? OK, but let me pop back, find my room and get changed into a party dress. If we're going to a posh do, there's no way I'm going to let anyone out-frock me.'

21

C

hapter Three

Return To Mars

Mrs Fukuyama and her husband had arrived in London the afternoon before, but until now their only contact with the city had been the view of the suburban streets from the window of the coach that had whisked them from the airport to their eight-storey hotel in Kensington. The view from their window was of a flat expanse of converted mews and modern hotels, broken only by a large building cal ed Earls Court. The hotel room was clean and air-conditioned, but could have been anywhere in the world from Boston to Beirut.

After breakfast, they had ventured out of the hotel to explore the City. The Tube station was just around the corner.

They'd bought their tickets and descended into the world beneath the city.

They had emerged at Big Ben, walked around it, taken their photos and walked a little way up the banks of the Thames. The city was busy, the roads full of traffic, but few of the shops were open yet. It had been a short walk from there to Trafalgar Square, or so it had appeared on the map. In actuality it had taken half an hour to get there, punctuated by a couple of stops at tea shops that had struggled open. It was a public holiday, apparently, something to do with the Mars Landing.

Now they were here, her husband's attention had been caught by a blue box sitting at the foot of Nelson's Column.

He was running his fingers along it.

'It's humming,' he concluded.

The door opened and a young man bounded out, almost crashing into them. His clothes suggested he was a tour guide, or a street entertainer. The woman who trailed after him reinforced this impression: although it was not yet nine-thirty in the morning, she wore a strapless peach sequin dress, elbow-length lace gloves and pil - box hat. The two couples stared at each other for a second before her husband plucked up his courage and asked the strange man what the box was.

The reply came in perfect Japanese, 'This is a police box. They were more common before the advent of the walkie-talkie, but they're beginning to reappear now. You can call a policeman from here if you need help.'

'It is very striking. Would you mind taking a photograph of us in front of it?'

'I'll do it.' The Englishwoman took the camera, examined it for a moment and then pointed it towards the trio, who had posed themselves in front of the door. 'Say "cheese",' she ordered them, again in perfect Japanese.

There was a flash and the woman stepped back over.

'Thank you,' Mr Fukuyama said, checking his list, 'Now, how do my wife and myself get to the Tower of London?'

The strange man thought about the question. 'You could try committing treason,' he suggested gently.

The other three laughed, leaving him a little bewildered.

'Circle and District Line, the nearest stop is Tower Hil ,' the woman supplied.

The two tourists thanked them and set off to the nearest tube station.

***

'It is a very good job that my daughter is too young to know who you

are.'

He kept his distance, standing at the other end of the churchyard. Despite the familiar voice, underneath that overcoat he'd grown fat. His hair had thinned, and that moustache of his was grey. Despite that, he'd managed to arrive without Christian seeing him. Crows were cawing in the next field.

'It's a very good job that she's old enough by now to have her own phone. Good morning, Alistair.'

Brigadier Alistair Gordon Lethbridge-Stewart moved a little closer, became a little warier. 'Good morning, Lex,' he replied finally, when they were ten feet apart.

'You didn't call the police?'

The Brigadier straightened. 'When you telephoned I gave you my word that I wouldn't. Not until I came to hear what you have to say. You used to be one of my men. I owe a fel ow Guardsman that much.' His hands were deep in his coat pockets.

'Are you carrying a gun?'

'Wouldn't you be?'

Christian laughed, holding his hands away from his body. 'I'm not,' he answered.

Lethbridge-Stewart couldn't see the humour of the situation. 'Why did you call me?'

Alexander Christian bit his lip. 'Because you are the only person in the world that I can trust. Something's going to happen, Alistair. On Mars and here in Britain. Something you have to help me stop.'

***

At the main entrance of the National Space Museum, the doors were being opened. The VIPs invited to attend at Mission Control itself were going through an adjacent door, where their invitations were being careful y checked.

They'd pass through a couple of other security points before going below ground level to their social gathering.

Without invitations, the Doctor and Benny weren't going to be able to get in. At least not through the front door. So, they joined a coach party and were herded through the public entrance, past the lobby and into the first of the public galleries. The hal was filled with display cases full of bulky space suits. The tour guide hadn't noticed them join the edge of the group, she was too busy fielding questions about how astronauts went to the toilet and whether the boy astronauts ever had sex with the girl astronauts. Benny found it reassuring that amidst state-of-the-art technology and on the brink of interplanetary conquest, the human race still had its priorities right.

The Doctor and Benny mingled with the group, careful to remember their objective. Casually, the Doctor glanced at a map of the building hanging from one wall. Disguising it as a yawn, he managed to indicate to his companion where they needed to head next. As soon as possible, they extricated themselves and stepped through into the Main Hall.

An actual Mars Probe hung suspended in mid-air twenty feet above their heads. The hal was vast, but gleaming and white, packed with artefacts from the international space programmes of the nineteen-seventies. They walked past the scale models, the photographs and the display case featuring the 'Astronaut's Survival Kit'. Benny paused at the full-sized mock-up of the inside of an old space capsule. It was cramped, of course, but the thing that struck her was how old-fashioned it was: the displays were mechanical, not LED or even digital, the controls were clunky switches, the computer that took up half the room wouldn't have been powerful enough to run the average washing machine even now, a couple of decades later. It was an object that belonged to the era of the eight-track cartridge, nylon slacks and the Ford Capri. This wasn't the retro-futurism of the TARDIS, with its incomprehensible forces hiding behind a Jules Verne veneer: this was the real thing.

The sound of the sonic screwdriver interrupted her train of thought.

The Doctor was bent over a display case, prising off the glass cover. The alarms hadn't gone off, but neither of them were exactly inconspicuous in their outfits. Benny strode across the room, and saw the Doctor scraping up some red dust into an empty test tube.

'Martian soil,' he announced by way of explanation.

'Yes, I know.'

The Doctor closed the case, sealing it up again. The test tube had already disappeared into the depths of his frock coat. 'Caldwel was concerned about the soil, remember?'

'Yes.'

'Look at this case, though. There's pounds of the stuff, on public display.'

'It's still in limited supply. It would cost hundreds of millions of pounds to get any more.'

'Bernice, ordinary Martian soil can't be of much scientific interest nowadays - once you've found out the exact composition, what else is there to know? That man was critically injured, but that soil was one of the only two things on his mind at that moment. No, I suspect that when we compare this soil with the sample we acquired this morning we'll find a big clue to this mystery.'

'Fine,' Benny conceded. She hesitated. 'Didn't Caldwell also say something about someone escaping?'

The Doctor grabbed Benny's arm and led her to a display board. Ranged in front of her were photographs of all the Mars crews, every one of them happy, smiling clean-cut folk in neat uniforms or shiny spacesuits. The Doctor pointed to the very last picture. Three people, two men and a woman.

'Alexander Christian,' the Doctor declared. As Benny read, her jaw slowly began dropping.

***

'Some of you may need reminding about Alexander Christian,' Hal iwell began. 'Those of you old enough will remember him very well indeed, but you won't know the whole truth. The full facts were never released by the government for reasons that will become apparent.'

She had been driven down the M2 at high speed, with full police motorcycle escort. When the traffic parted and you didn't have to stick to the speed limit it was amazing how fast you could get around the country. She'd got from Whitehall to Canterbury in three quarters of an hour. Now she stood in front of a couple of dozen senior Kent policemen, the people who would be co-ordinating the manhunt on the ground.

She paused and put the first slide up on the screen. Alexander Christian at twenty-nine, resplendent in his Space Defence Division uniform. He had a movie-star face, not a bland Aryan look, but an odd and angular with eyebrows that looked like a symbol in shorthand. A memorable face.

'This is how "Lex" Christian looked just before Mars Probe 13 was launched.' She pressed the control and the picture changed. Now Christian had been joined by two others: a plump, white-haired man in his forties and a beautiful redhead in her mid-twenties. All three were smiling, Christian was in the middle with his arms around both of them.

'The crew of Mars Probe 13. Alexander Christian, Albert Fitzwil iam and Madeline Goodfellow. Christian shared quarters with Fitzwilliam, he was the sometime lover of Goodfellow. They had been friends for nearly five years.

This is what he did to them.'

The inside of a space capsule, in full colour. Blood smeared over the chrome and plastic, two bodies in the centre of the picture, their chests split open exposing glistening organs, their eyes missing. Behind them a bank of monitors had been smashed, the computer panels had been smashed apart.

'As he left Mars, thirty-two weeks into the Mars 13 mission he was commanding, Alexander Christian, hero of the British space programme, took a fire axe and did that to his best friends. For eight months, he sat among the blood and filth and smashed equipment. Every day, at nine o'clock GMT precisely, he would send messages to mission control. These were little more than rants, littered with swear words and Biblical allusions.

'The messages were never released, of course, but one of the American networks managed to intercept one. This is what they broadcast of it.' She pressed the tape recorder button.

'Had to die. Had to -bleep- die. World -bleep-. -bleep-.' She pressed the 'stop' button.

'Well, you get the gist. At no point did he offer explanations, at no point did he talk to the psychologists or negotiators on the ground. After eight months, his capsule automatically splashed down in the

North Atlantic. The HMS Sheffield was waiting for him, and he was arrested by armed sailors. At a court martial held in camera, Alexander Christian was committed to a top security mental institution, with the unanimous recommendation being that he should never be released. The thirteen Mars missions cost the British taxpayer nearly five billion pounds.

That was a lot of money back in those days - over a year's worth of North Sea Oil revenue. Alexander Christian had been a national hero, now he was an insane killer, and the whole affair was very embarrassing for a lot of people. So, it was hushed up, the evidence was destroyed, the tabloids were told to go easy on Christian, and everyone but everyone involved was sworn to silence. The victims had no living relatives: Fitzwilliam's aunt died while he was en route to Mars. There were no pictures of Christian al owed when he returned to Earth. Starved of any new information or photographs, the story died. Mars 13 was the last mission to Mars for twenty years. Until today, in fact.'

'Excuse me, Director, but what drove him mad?'

Veronica Halliwell shrugged. 'Claustrophobia, a fear of the unknown. He was trapped in that steel box for the best part of a year, with only those two as company. The day before, he'd radioed in as normal.'

Halliwell paused, sipped from her water and put up another slide, showing a map of Kent. The crash-site was ringed in red.

'An hour and a half ago, Alexander Christian escaped. As you know, over the years the Mars astronauts have been unlucky - they've had more than their fair share of car crashes, boating accidents and nervous breakdowns.

Alexander Christian was always the most experienced Mars astronaut - he'd been there twice before Mars Probe 13. They wanted him at Space Centre in Devesham to provide his expertise in the event of problems with the mission. En route from Fortress Island, his helicopter crashed in Kent, just south of Canterbury. Everyone with him died, not all of them in the crash. He is now on the loose, he is possibly armed, and he is most definitely dangerous. We're bringing in army helicopters, and there's an SAS squad on its way. Your men are not to approach Christian when they find him.'

'Is that the only photo of him?' the Chief Constable asked. Hal iwel pressed the projector control again.

'There are no more recent photographs of him, but prison staff have helped us come up with this computer-enhanced picture of what he looks like now. They say that he's resourceful, daring and intel igent. He has attempted to escape his prisons a dozen times, using a different method each time, and came damn close to getting out.'

'Are we telling the public?'

'Not yet. I was with the Home Secretary when we heard about the escape. He doesn't want to cause a panic, but he's agreed that if we haven't found him by noon-thirty then warnings will be posted on the lunchtime news.'

'Do we know what his objectives might be?'

'A link with the Mars landing seems the most likely. We've posted extra guards at Devesham and at the National Space Museum.'

24

'An axe-murderer? An escaped axe-murdering ex-astronaut?'

'Yes. Trying saying that three times when you're drunk.'

'I think I might just take you up on that.' The caption underneath the photograph was a model of understatement, but it managed to convey the information that Alexander Christian had kil ed his shipmates.

The Doctor plucked his pocket watch from his waistcoat. It was the same watch that he had worn before he changed, and he used the same technique to flick it open with one hand. 'Ten thirty. Time to join the party.'

The great and the good had been drifting past them for the last ten minutes or so. They were getting a condensed version of the guided tour as they headed to the stairways at the back of the Main Hall. The Doctor's plan was that they would join a group of VIPs and follow them down to Mission Control.

Benny tried to keep her mind off Alexander Christian by standing at the edge of the Hall and identifying as many of the guests as she could as they walked past. The first one she had got had been Steven Hawking. He'd been deep in conversation with Richard Dawkins and his wife, and had been helped down the stairs by a couple of hefty security guards. Jarvis Cocker and Chris Evans followed, chatting about something. The next woman Benny recognised was either

Mystic Meg or Lady Di (Benny always got them mixed up). She had no problem identifying Lady Creighton-Ward - she didn't live far from the house in Allen Road and Benny had often seen her being driven around the Kent countryside. All were wearing their poshest outfits, and despite her earlier anxieties that she'd be under - or over- dressed, Benny felt that her own ensemble had been well-judged.

The Doctor took her arm, and Benny found herself following Gillian Anderson through a low archway down a short stairway and into the party. No-one checked for an invite, but a man on the door gave them the once-over. Benny smiled at him with her best 'I'm meant to be here' look.

There were about two hundred people in the room, more if you included the waiters milling around the little social groups that had begun to form. The reception was being held in an observation gallery that overhung Mission Control. Beneath them, two dozen scientists were at their posts, eyes fixed on the giant screen that dominated the back wall. Up here there was row upon row of red chairs arranged to watch the show. A big digital clock above the observation bay window was counting down to the landing. It was currently hovering just over the ten minutes mark. There was a podium at one side of the bay window, complete with a TV monitor and autocue.

A buffet had been laid out down one wal and the rich and the famous were picking away at it. In one corner Richard Branson and Alan Yentob were arguing about something, in another Geoffrey Hoyt was sharing a drink with Dame Emma Knight. Beneath the gentle rumble of conversation music was playing: Holst. Around the edge of the room film crews had set up, and journalists from around the world were pulling celebrities from the edge of the crowd to share a few words of wisdom with their viewers.

A waiter hurried by, and Benny plucked a champagne glass from his tray with an expertise born of years snatching free drinks.

She sniffed it and sipped it. 'Nice,' she concluded.

'A 1982 Ayala. A good year.' The Doctor hadn't taken any for himself, and had apparently identified the vintage just by looking at the glass or catching a whiff of it on her breath.

'I've just seen someone I recognise,' he declared, disappearing into the crowd.

'Great, leave me here with my champagne,' Benny moaned. 'Second

thoughts, Doctor, you do that.' She took another sip and gazed around the room. She was rather disappointed that none of the big celebrities were here.

Her intensive study of The Mirror over the last week meant that she knew exactly which pop stars and models ought to be at such a bash, but virtually everyone here was a politician or a scientist.

'I'm sorry to hear about the problems with your marriage,' a voice piped up nearby. Benny looked down. A little old woman in a red coat and hat was standing in front of her, clutching a handbag in front of her.

Benny swallowed a little more champagne. 'Heavens, word gets around, doesn't it?'

The old woman blinked at her through big round glasses. 'If it's any consolation, it sounds like it was al his fault.

And I loved Sense and Sensibility.' She disappeared back into the gathering, waving at someone with a TV

camera.

'Er yes ... me too!' Benny cal ed after her.

***

The Doctor bobbed through the crowds. He bumped straight into a man in a dark suit, stopping them both in their tracks. The man he had obstructed was in his late sixties, with thin white hair and an aquiline face.

'I know you ... ' the Doctor began.

'I should certainly hope so,' the man said, smiling a politician's smile. A couple of the people around him laughed nervously. They were all senior members of the government.

'Teddy Greyhaven. You were the Minister of Science in the nineteen-seventies. You oversaw massive government investment in science and technology.'

'I like to think that I kept the white hot heat of the technological revolution stoked up for a couple of years,' he said with mock-

modesty. 'I'm Lord Greyhaven, now, though. I have very little influence nowadays.'

The Doctor's eyes narrowed. 'No, no. You wouldn't have.' He continued on his way, nearly colliding with the Home Secretary as he strode up to Greyhaven and his group.

***

Benny al owed the waiter to refil her glass. The Doctor had still not reappeared.

There was a tap on her shoulder and she turned.

'Hello stranger.' Eve Waugh was gorgeous in a halter-top dress that showed off her figure while keeping every inch of it swathed in powder-blue silk. The two women circled each other, looking each other up and down.

'I like your dress,' they said in unison, before laughing. Behind Eve, her cameraman was in his tuxedo, checking lighting levels.

'I can't interview you now,' Eve complained. 'That dress is strapless.'

'Is this some policy of the American networks that I should know about? Am I too rude for them?'

'In a way: when Alan does his standard head and shoulders shot, you'll look naked from the hat down.' Eve drew a line over her own chest with a finger by way of demonstration.

Benny glanced down at herself, a little self-consciously.

'Do you know anyone here?' Eve asked.

'I recognise just about everybody,' Benny said, looking back up, 'but I don't know any of them personally.'

'Do you know who that is? The black woman in the United Nations dress uniform?'

Benny peered across the room to the slight figure keeping close to the fire exit.

'Yes I do, as a matter of fact. That's whatsername ... Bambera.' Brigadier Winifred Bambera. Benny racked her brains, trying to remember when they had met - it had been outside Buckingham

Palace, a couple of years in the future. 'She works for UNIT.'

At the mention of the name, Benny could have sworn that a couple of people around the room looked up.

'Really?' Waugh said seriously, 'Now, that particular organisation is one of my special hobbies. How much do you know about them?'

'Enough to know that we shouldn't discuss them too loudly in here. And enough to know that Bambera's here on business.'

'If she wasn't on business, she wouldn't be hiding that automatic pistol in her waistband. Maybe we'll carry on this conversation later? My hotel room?'

The Doctor materialised out of the crowd. 'I saw Ralph Cornish. He's over there, look, with his boyfriend.' A tall chap with peppery hair and a matching crisp suit was chatting to a young man.

'And who's Ralph Cornish?'

'He was the head of the British Space Programme at the time of the first Mars Missions,' Eve Waugh supplied.

'He didn't recognise me from back then,' the Doctor said sadly.

'We he wouldn't,' Benny reminded him gently. Eve was watching them carefully, presumably wondering what the Doctor had been doing at Space Centre in his mid-teens.

The countdown had reached ten minutes.

'If I could have your attention,' a young man was cal ing, 'the Mars Lander has finished its preparations and is nearly ready. If you could all take your seats.'

'See you later,' Eve called, hurrying away.

The pitch of the conversation became more excited, and the guests began shuffling into their designated places.

Benny hoped that there were more chairs than guests. She squeezed her way past the Spice Girls to take an empty chair. Somehow the Doctor was already in the next seat, sharing a joke with Jeremy Paxman.

'The Mars Orbiter,' a bearded scientist at the podium began explaining, 'has been orbiting Mars for the last two days. In that time, instruments have been mapping the surface and taking measurements of the thin Martian atmosphere. The crew have also deployed a couple of unmanned vehicles, released weather balloons and launched a couple of satellites that will stay in orbit long after this mission has come home. All that information is being collected and collated at the Space Centre at Devesham. Meanwhile, they have also been preparing the Mars Lander.'

The video screen flickered into life, showing a CGI representation of the Mars craft. As the scientist continued to explain, Benny quickly established that the new Mars Probe was the same sort of arrangement as the old Apollo missions: a command module would stay in orbit while a four-man Lander would detach itself and drop down to the surface. The Mars 97 was about the size of the old Apol o rocket, but nothing was jettisoned: instead of liquid fuel, the three hundred metre length of the spacecraft was given over to the atomic engine. The eight-man crew huddled together in the compartment in the nosecone of the vessel during the four-month journey to Mars - the new atomic motors meant that the vessel was twice as fast as the old Mars Probes.

'They'l stay on the Martian surface for a month,' the scientist continued. 'The aim of the mission is to conduct a full geological survey of the Mare Sirenum.'

'Been there, done that,' Benny said softly to the Doctor. She expected him to beam back, but instead he scowled, and made a show of straining to hear the lecture.

'We have the aim of having a full, working colony on Mars in the next ten years. The Mars 97 Mission will conduct a full feasibility study into this. If the Mars colony is not possible, then all is not lost: IIF are planning to build a nuclear-waste storage facility on the Moon in the next two years, the first manned flight to Jupiter is planned for two years after that. To tel us all how this has been possible, we have an honoured guest here this morning: Mr David Staines, the Home Secretary.'

A thin, bespectacled man made his way forward. The applause rippled around him and the world's television cameras followed his progress. The autocue was waiting at the podium.

'Today, after over twenty years, the human race returns to Mars. This would be a cause for celebration regardless of which nation had got

there. But it isn't, I am sure, jingoism to suggest that we are all particularly glad that it is the United Kingdom that got there first.' - applause - 'Twenty years ago, the British space programme was a clear demonstration that our country still had the know-how to be a world-beater. I was a young man when Grosvenor and Guest planted the Union Flag at the foot of mighty Olympus Mons. My heart still swells to think of it: British astronauts staring up at the mightiest feature of the solar system, a mountain almost three times the size of Everest. And remember just who it was that reached the summit of that particular Himalaya before anyone else!'

'Yes,' the Doctor whispered across to Benny above the applause, 'it was Sherpa Tensing. I should know, it was me that pulled him up. It was a good half-minute before Edmund joined us.'

Staines had continued. 'Like those early flights, the Mars 97 Mission has been a showcase for cutting-edge British technology, proof if it were needed that British is still best. An example to the world of what can be achieved when the worlds of big business and science co-operate with the government and the military. Unlike those first missions, Mars 97 hasn't cost the British taxpayer a single penny, thanks to Lottery grants and private funding.

That and the support of many of Britain's leading manufacturers: it is fair to say that without the revolutionary atomic motors built in Reigate by Donneby's the Mars rocket wouldn't have ever got ... off the ground - ' - laughter -

'Without the computers built by ACL and software designed by I2, without the al oys developed at Vickers and Rolls-Royce or the communications equipment custom-made by BT or a thousand smal er contributions from a thousand smaller companies this would never have been possible. The Mars 97 programme is a testament to British enterprise. But none of it would have been possible without a guiding intelligence. A man of vision. Ladies and gentlemen, as the Mars 97 prepares for its historic landing, please remember that we are all here today because of my friend and mentor, Lord Edward Greyhaven. Thank you.'

They were applauding the Home Secretary as he returned to his seat, but the warmest reception was for the old man sitting in the next seat. The Doctor was studying him keenly. After some coaxing, Greyhaven stood, and waved to the audience. The applause got a little louder.

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High, high above Mars the final checks had just been completed.

Captain Richard Michaels looked back at the four men who had the worst job in the Space Service. Mars 97 had an eight-man crew, but only half of them would set foot on the Red Planet. The other four would stay up here, two hundred miles up. They were vital to the mission, they'd be relaying instructions, acting as back-up, monitoring the information from the unmanned probes. They'd never be able to tell their grandchildren that they'd walked on Mars as part of this mission. The crew had drawn lots a year ago to see who'd have which duty. Since then, the unlucky four had been resigned to this moment, when their col eagues would leave them to walk on an alien world. It hadn't made it any more palatable, and there had been the odd tense moment on the four month trip out.

Singh, Campbell, McGowan and Lewis would be staying. He, Andi McCray, Bob Haigh and Claudia would be going down to the surface.

That had been the plan right up until this morning, when Claudia had fallen ill. She'd eaten something that disagreed with her - quite an achievement in such a regulated environment. She'd been confined to quarters since then, with only Singh allowed to see her. Everything about the mission was carefully balanced: one crew member ill for a day wasn't too bad, but if she had a bug that another crewman caught then they might have to abort the mission.

Five hours to go, and Michaels had been forced to decide which of the other four was coming down.

Singh had been the calmest. He'd always been the most rational of the crew - agreeing to cut his hair and shave his beard to be an astronaut, despite his religious beliefs. He'd accepted the result of the bal ot without reservation, and was able to put the whole thing into perspective - he was still an astronaut, after al . But it couldn't be him - as the only one with full medical training he was needed up here to monitor Claudia. Campbell had been the worst: three months ago he'd been a serious cause for concern - his 'jokes' on the subject of the landing party had continued long after he'd been asked to stop, and he'd undermined morale.

But he was the one, his record more than made that clear. He'd confirmed the choice with London, and told the crew two hours ago, when everyone was too busy to get angry or disappointed.

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The face of Richard Michaels filled the huge video screen. The crowd at the National Space Museum cheered.

He was playing to the television audience, which clearly made him a bit nervous. 'Hel o there, this is Mars 97. The pictures you are seeing now are coming from a long way away. Mars is nearly sixty million miles away from Earth.

Or, to put it another way, back on Earth Washington and Moscow are about seven thousand miles apart but my crew and I are eight thousand six hundred times as far away from you. That means that even at the speed of light, our radio signals take nearly five minutes to reach you. These pictures are five minutes old and by now, God willing, we're walking around on Mars. Hope that doesn't take the shine off the live coverage!'

A round of applause and a little laughter, with al eyes fixed on the screen.

'OK, London Control. All systems ready. Lander is go. Andy, could you do the honours?'

A spacesuited figure, Benny couldn't work out whether it was a man or a woman, pulled a control and a rumble sounded along the ship.

The picture cut to an exterior view. A camera mounted about halfway along the length of the Command Module.

Now, the Lander was emerging slowly from its compartment, edging out like a butterfly from a chrysalis. It looked vaguely insect-like, with stubby landing gear, delicate solar panels and communications arrays. Beneath the craft, Benny recognised the southern hemisphere of Mars. She'd made the same trip, although by her native twenty-sixth century shuttlecraft were fitted with antigravs and the journey was as routine as InterCity train travel in the nineteen-nineties. That was only because of pioneers like these people, of course.

An engine on the underside of the Lander flared and it shot away.

'London, Lander is good. Entering radio blackou-.'

Behind them, a dozen reporters explained to their audience that this was perfectly normal as the craft entered an atmosphere.

After a couple of tense moments, a message crackled through the loudspeaker: 'London. This is Mars Lander.

We're down and safe.'

Everyone in the room was on their feet, cheering. Benny found to her surprise that so was she. After a couple of seconds, a picture of a barren landscape flashed up onto the screen. The rusty soil and pink sky were familiar to Benny, everyone else, the Doctor included, was fixed to the screen. The camera was mounted to the landing gear, metal struts were visible in the foreground, and the ladder that the astronauts would climb down was also in plain view. After a minute or so it was clear that no-one was going to be coming down that ladder for a while.

'What's the delay?' she asked the Doctor.

'The astronauts have to get used to the gravity, they check the conditions outside. They triple-check the airlock and the spacesuits and they radio to London for the go-ahead.'

'That sounds a pretty lengthy procedure.'

'About quarter of an hour, perhaps less.'

Benny craned her neck. At the back of the room, the journalists were interviewing scientists and politicians. This event was going out live. She felt for the reporters forced to find something to say to fill the gap, the only picture from another world being a static image that could have been Arizona if it wasn't for the pink sky.

28

Benny recognised the twilight from her expedition: even at noon on the Mare Sirenum the brightest it got was a late-evening grey.

The guests were gradually realising that there was going to be a delay, and were breaking off to replenish their drinks or chat to their friends. The man the Home Secretary had mentioned in his speech, Lord Greyhaven, wasn't there, although the rest of his circle were.

Benny turned to the Doctor to see what he planned to do for the next ten minutes. A young man, Ralph Cornish's friend, was leaning over him, whispering something, passing something to him. Then he had gone.

Benny bent across. 'What's up?'

'That young man just passed me a note,' the Doctor explained. He unfolded it. ' "Chesterton Road, 12.00. Green Door. Bring violets." ' he read, bemused.

There was movement on the ladder.

'That was quick,' the Doctor said cheerfully.

A bulky spacesuit hopped down the ladder. He wasn't as nimble as he would have been on the Moon, the gravity was about twice as strong, but he moved in wide, arcing leaps.

There wasn't a carefully-prepared sound-bite, or indeed any ceremony. Just a simple 'I'm on the surface, chaps'.

Two other astronauts followed him out, and they spent some time bouncing around, getting used to the idea that they were on an alien planet. 'Keep that camera pointing that way, Bob. There's a beautiful violet sky,' Michaels said final y.

Whatever else was said was drowned out by the cheers from Mission Control and the party guests in the observation gallery. The cameramen were relaxing now, turning off their equipment. They'd got the interviews they'd wanted before the landing and while the astronauts were getting ready for their Marswalk. The guests were leaving their seats, stretching. They were being ushered out by the waiters, who really weren't tolerating any dawdlers. Benny looked around for Eve, who was by the door, trying to collar Lord Greyhaven for an interview.

'Is that it?' the Doctor said, still firmly in his seat.

'That's the end of the live coverage, yes, sir,' a waiter told him as he collected up the empty glasses. 'The museum restaurant, The Observatory, is still open - a lot of the guests will be eating lunch there. It's fully licensed.'

Bernice giggled. 'How about it, Doctor, fancy a trip to the Mars Bar? I think that they want us to leave.' The last few journalists and their teams were being ushered away, a curtain was being drawn over the observation window overlooking Mission Control.

'Something odd's going on ... ' the Doctor muttered.

Winifred Bambera was standing by the door, keeping an eye on the guests as they filed out.

'Isn't that - ?' the Doctor began, but he was cut off from a burst of static from the loudspeaker. Down in Mission Control, a couple of technicians scuttled back to their posts.

'London Control, this is Michaels. Condition violet should now be in place, you've had your ten minutes. Cut the live feed. I can't wait any longer.'

Bambera was scowling at one of the waiters who was moving to pull out the lead from the loudspeaker. The Doctor leapt over a row of seats, ran to the front of the room and yanked the curtain that had been blocking their view of Mission Control.

Captain Michaels' helmet filled the giant screen that dominated the room down there. 'We've found an archway,'

the loudspeaker crackled, 'Repeat, an archway, in the sand.'

The picture panned around away from the commander and settled on a circular shape cut into the side of a low rock formation. It was indeed a high archway, leading into a cave. It was too dark to see anything more than a few feet inside, but the archway was clearly not a natural feature - there was definitely a keystone there, and what looked like carved symbols.

'Please advise, London Control.'

Chapter Four

Gratuitous Violets

The powerful beam of light swept down, petering out after two hundred metres. After walking through a short tunnel, al four of the astronauts had entered the cavern. The cavern was irregular in shape, made up of the black volcanic rock common on Mars. Cut into the floor of the chamber was a circular pit, twenty metres in diameter, fifty times as deep at least. Commander Michaels wasn't looking at the pit, but rather what was inside it.

He had kept his radio mike open all the time, and was keeping up a running commentary. The Command Module had informed them that the pictures from Bob's camera weren't getting through properly - the volcanic rock was interfering with the signal. Michaels struggled to find the words. 'The pit is full of large structures, solid blue crystal.

They are, er, stalactites.'

'Stalagmites,' Andi's voice corrected him, ' "Tites come down".' Andi took up the commentary. 'They project up from the floor, narrowing at the top. Stalagmites the size of cathedral spires. The low gravity means they can grow so much taller than they can on Earth.'

'Are they a natural feature?' A male voice crackled from the Command Module. The sound was becoming as erratic as the pictures - Michaels couldn't even identify the speaker for certain.

'Good question. What do we think?'

The four astronauts stepped forward, right to the edge of the abyss. They looked across at the spires and then back to each other. Andi, Bob and Campbell all shook their heads.

'Negative,' Michaels stated, 'These are artificial in origin.'

'Is that ice in there?' Bob asked. Michaels checked his wrist monitor. It was cool in here, with no atmospheric water vapour.

'There's so little water on Mars, how could it be ice?' Campbell objected, bringing a torch beam to bear on the nearest spire.

There was a shape inside, a humanoid shape.

***

Eve checked her make-up and hair in the mirror.

'OK Alan?'

'Sure,' her cameraman grunted. 'Ready to rol .'

'Do I pass muster?' Lord Greyhaven asked. He was the picture of English elegance in a single-breasted suit with a silk tie and matching handkerchief. There was something classy about a man that had over a bil ion dollars but didn't feel the need to exude wealth.

Not that he'd got his money because his great granddad was at Agincourt. While she was researching this story, Eve had often seen footage of Edward Greyhaven, then a fortysomething politician with a black quiff and some very sharp suits. He'd managed to get the Treasury to pour money into R&D back then, and the British had led the world in the field of pure research. Every month he'd open some new project that promised to revolutionise the way people lived their lives. Not all of them had failed, either. If only the rest of British industry had been in a state to exploit all that new technology. Greyhaven had made his fortune as a consultant after he'd left office. Twenty years on, he looked more distinguished, but there was still a mischievous twinkle in his eye.

'You look good. Er ... before we start, I've got a question. How - ?'

'You can cal me Teddy, or Edward if that's too informal.'

Eve was caught out, something that rarely happened. 'How did you know that's what I was going to ask?'

'I've been interviewed by Americans before, Mrs Waugh. You don't have to address me as "Your Lordship". And my name is spelt with an ‘e’, not an ‘a’.'

'You don't have to cal me "Mrs". I'm not married.'

'I'm afraid that I am,' he replied, chuckling. 'Is this your first time in London?'

'No. Who's doing this interview, me or you? It's the second time this year. I covered the general election. No need to ask you about the result.'

Greyhaven smiled. He had flourished regardless of which group of politicians happened to be in charge. 'Which hotel are you in?'

She told him. He brightened. 'Oh yes, an excellent place. If you're eating in the restaurant there, I recommend the lamb. If not, try the Thai place around the corner.'

'Thank you. Shal we begin? Ready Alan?'

'Still ready.'

***

The picture on the screen at London showed the three astronauts venturing towards the archway, their torch beams coming on and leaving streaks of light across the Martian landscape. These were five-minute old pictures.

'I must ask you al to leave.'

The Doctor turned his attention away from the screen for just a second. The large young men wore black wool suits that might have been tailor-made to make them look like secret service agents. There were only three people left in the observation bay now: Bambera, Bernice and the Doctor himself. They'd sent three men to get them out.

Each guard picked a target and began to advance.

With a couple of seconds before the guard reached him, the Doctor turned back to the screen. The astronaut with the camera followed his colleagues into the tunnel, and the picture became darker, more grainy.

The Doctor was grabbed from behind, and pul ed away from the window. The giant screen lurched out of view.

Benny was kicking and shouting, trying to wriggle free.

Bambera was more calm, although her voice was just as loud: 'I am a member of the United Nations Intelligence Taskforce.'

'No sudden moves,' one of the men warned.

The Doctor snatched another glance at the screen. The astronauts

were still in the tunnel, there was more static now than picture. His head snapped back to look at Bambera and her antagonist.

'I'm reaching for my ID,' Bambera said sternly. 'Believe me, son, if you want to play Top Trumps with our security clearances you'll lose unless you're the Secretary-General herself.' When Bambera held up her security card, the guard recoiled like a vampire at the sign of the cross.

The Doctor and Bernice weren't so lucky. They were now being dragged across the room to the door, and both had found it impossible to break their captor's grip. The guard clasping the Doctor was paying particularly little attention to how he held his charge, choosing to dig in his nails and shake him as he moved.

'Stop this!' the Doctor yel ed. Everyone in the room stopped and faced him.

'Winifred, I am the Doctor and this is my friend Bernice. We have to get down there, to Mission Control. There might still be time to save those astronauts.'

'The Doctor? Ancelyn and Lethbridge-Stewart both said that you could change your - '

'Come on! We haven't time for this now!' he shouted.

'These people are with me,' Bambera informed the guards firmly. The one in charge shrugged, and let all three out of the observation bay.

'Through here for mission control,' he ordered, opening up a door for them. Al three piled through.

The door slammed shut and to their acute embarrassment the Doctor, Bernice and Bambera found themselves standing in an empty alleyway on the wrong side of a fire door.

They quickly determined that it had been barricaded from the inside and that nothing short of an ATR would open it.

'I can't believe we just fell for that,' the Doctor groaned.

'I need to get in touch with UNIT HQ,' Bambera snarled, plucking her radio from her breast pocket. 'Seabird to HQ.

Seabird to HQ. Hey! Where are you going?'

The Doctor and Bernice were already running off.

***

Staines found Lord Greyhaven as he stepped out of the Gents.

'That al went rather wel didn't it, Teddy?'

Greyhaven smiled. 'Of course it did, dear boy. A marvel ous speech, by the way.'

The Home Secretary grinned. When Lord Greyhaven praised you it was like getting a special mention from the Headmaster at morning assembly. Staines decided to try for another positive response. 'It was no more than you deserve, Teddy.'

This time he was rewarded with only a faint tic at the corner of the mouth. Walking side by side like this, Staines was surprised to notice how short the former Minister for Science was.

'Are you well, Lord Greyhaven?'

'Everything is wonderful, Staines. There's an Englishman on Mars, the FT index is up ten percent on the day and I've just been interviewed by a lovely American girl younger than my granddaughter who gave me her telephone number.'

'Gol y. What did you do?'

'I gave her my card and told her that I would be happy to help in any way that I could.'

'How do we top that? Lunch at the club?'

'No, Staines, I think that now I should get down to Mission Control and see if I can be of any help down there. By all means come with me.'

***

Lethbridge-Stewart hadn't taken his eyes of Alexander Christian since he'd first seen him. They'd walked down the footpath to the railway station in silence, and all the time the Brigadier had kept him covered with his pistol.

Christian was nervous of being spotted, but the streets were deserted: everyone was inside watching the Mars Landing on television. About

ten minutes ago there had been a rowdy cheer from inside the pub on the corner.

There was an Englishman on Mars again. The Brigadier couldn't let that distract him. Much as he wanted to hear that the mission was a success, much as he wanted to hear the first words of the astronauts as they were spoken, he couldn't predict what Christian's reaction would be if he watched the coverage, so they couldn't risk a cafe or a pub.

They sat down on a bench, catching their breath. Neither of them were young men any more, although Christian had a ten year advantage over him.

'All right, Lex. Tell me.'

'They buried me, Alistair. They buried me for over twenty years. I'm not mad. I didn't kill my crew.'

'I saw the photographs.'

'Fakes. You didn't see the bodies, did you?'

'No, whyever should I have done? What about the radio messages?'

'What messages, old chap?'

'You ranting and raving. A radio ham picked one of them up and sold them to the American television stations.'

There was a pause, the silence broken by the sound of a helicopter in the distance. Both men looked up at it.

'The radio antenna was destroyed in the attack. I couldn't broadcast. They were fakes, too. That's a police helicopter, Alistair, they're coming for me. We have to go.'

'We'll go when I say so. What do you mean "attack"?'

Christian turned to him, looked him square in the eye and without hesitating said, 'My crew were murdered on Mars. Not by me.'

'Cosmonauts? Are you telling me now that the Russians got to Mars?'

'Worse.'

'The Americans?'

'Worse.'

'Give me a straight answer, please Lex.'

'My crew were killed by Martians.' Alexander Christian paused. 'I was the only survivor. I ran back to the capsule and launched it, leaving behind the bodies of my crew. I radioed Earth, warned them about what I'd seen. And when I got back I was arrested and thrown into a mental institution.' He took a deep breath. 'Do you know how difficult it is to get out of a mental ward when you have to convince two doctors that you are sane, but you're too stubborn to let them hear what they want? I did see a Martian city. I've never doubted it for twenty years, not once.

Of course they think that I'm mad. You have to help me convince the government that there are aliens out there.

But you think I'm mad, too, don't you?' He looked up at Alistair again, frowning. 'You don't think I'm mad. Why not?'

'The British government has known about the existence of extraterrestrial life for over a century. Twenty years ago I was the commanding officer of a United Nations task force that tried to contain alien incursions. Describe these Martians,' the Brigadier ordered quietly.

***

The scientists at Mission Control watched helplessly as the picture and sound continued to break up. In between the bursts of static and the shouts of the astronauts there were just impressions that couldn't be assembled into a coherent narrative:

Hissing.

The sound of a visor cracking.

Red eyes, looming over them, burning like hot coals.

One of the torch beams snapping off.

A grunting, barking sound al around.

A claw like a giant crab's.

The camera lurching around.

Great slabs of green detaching themselves from the walls.

A woman's screams, cut short.

A pulsing sound, like air folding in on itself.

The picture and sound went dead.

***

David Staines tried to take a step back. He took a deep breath and turned to see what Lord Greyhaven was doing.

No-one else in the room was looking at Greyhaven, and why would they when they had so much to do? The former Minister of Science was standing at the back of the Mission Control room, and surely his expression would be the one of horror worn by everyone else in the room. But no. He stood impassively, watching the screen as though it were some science fiction blockbuster. Al his plans were in ruins, but he stood there like a rock.

The scientists were shouting their jargon:

'I've lost lifesigns on all four of them, sir.'

'The camera on the Lander just went off-line.'

'I've lost telemetry on the Lander.'

'Lander transponder dead.'

'They're dead, or else the signal is completely blocked.'

'There isn't anything else.'

'Re-establish contact with the Command Module,' Greyhaven suggested softly to the scientist who was manning the post immediately in front of them. Before his government positions, Teddy had been a captain of industry. Now all that authority was asserting itself.

The loudspeaker began crackling. Simultaneously, data that had been collected and stored for this moment flooded across the screens. The main screen flickered into life and the picture quickly resolved into the face of Astronaut Singh. He wore the standard issue plain blue

coveral s, and looked worried. He was in the Command Module, the part of the spacecraft that remained in orbit above Mars.

'London Control, this is Mars 97 Orbiter. Time 11:02 Zulu. Update: have not, repeat have not, been able to re-establish contact with the Lander. This is not, repeat not, a technical fault. I have no transponder response from Lander. Am forwarding al data collected from the surface. Please advise. Over.'

By the clock mounted on the wall, Staines worked out that the signal was already five minutes old.

32

Computers began chattering as more information from the Command Module reached them. Quickly, the staff at Mission Control readied their response. It was quite a skill, coming up with the best possible response, keeping the time-lag to an absolute minimum, but at the same time sending as much useful information or instructions as possible. Within a minute they had transmitted their response.

'Mars Orbiter, this is London Control. Time 11:08 GMT. We confirm communications lost with surface. Advise redeployment of survey satel ites. Show us the surface of the Mare Sirenum. How are you all up there? Over.'

It was going to be a full ten minutes until the brief response. 'Well done, everyone,' Lord Greyhaven congratulated the scientists, leaning awkwardly over one of the consoles to shake Theo Ogilvy's hand.

Something about that was bothering the Home Secretary until Theo Ogilvy stood up to make an announcement, interrupting his train of thought.

'There is nothing more we can do for the time being, ladies and gentleman. If any of you need a coffee or to stretch your legs then do it now.' A few of them left, but most stayed at their posts.

***

The Doctor bought a bunch of violets from the flower seller by Charing Cross tube station as Benny studied the note he had been passed again.

'Do you know where Chesterton Road is, then?'

'No, but that lad knew that I'd be able to get to it in plenty of time.' The Doctor ducked into a newsagents, Benny followed in his wake. Her ballgown was getting her funny looks now.

The Doctor had found the rack with the street maps and tourist guides on it.

'Ah, there we are.' He flicked through to the right page. Benny smiled wanly at the young Asian woman at the till.

'And that's the nearest tube station.' He measured out the distance with his thumb. 'Only about two minutes' walk away.'

Benny looked at him in his frock coat, eyes gleaming as he leafed through the A-Z, still clutching that bunch of violets in his hand.

'Have you any idea why he wants to see you?' she asked tentatively.

'No,' the Doctor said happily, replacing the A-Z. 'Do you?'

'Wel ... I was just wondering if he'd want me to come along.'

'What do you mean?'

They stepped out of the shop and out onto the busy pavement. The Doctor stood waiting for the answer, forcing the pedestrians to flow around him.

Benny collected her thoughts and began. 'Doctor, your new body is very ... well, I say "very", that doesn't mean that I personal y think ... I mean, compared to the way you used to look, of course, but not everything goes on looks.

But when it comes to the initial, y'know ... ' She blushed, realising she might be implicating herself here.

'Bernice, I don't understand what you are trying to say.'

'What I'm saying is that he might just want to see you because he fancies you.'

The Doctor looked blankly at her. 'Don't be ridiculous.'

'Who's being ridiculous?'

A big, fat man walking past glanced at her dress and smirked knowingly. Benny replied with one of her more severe frowns.

***

The Home Secretary stepped over to Ogilvy.

'Anything I can do, Professor?'

Ogilvy smiled wanly, 'There's nothing any of us can do for the moment.'

Staines nodded and returned to Greyhaven's side.

'What do we do, Teddy?'

'We wait. Al is not lost.'

'How can you say that? Those poor men.'

Suddenly, in front of them, there was a commotion.

'Sir! Signal from Mars.'

'Mars Orbiter to London Control. 11:14 Zulu. Roger that. Estimated one hour eighteen minutes to realign camera.

We're fine, Professor, don't worry. Will contact when satellites redeployed. Over.'

The sense of relief was tangible. It didn't last.

Screaming, and shouting.

'Airlocks!' one of the astronauts was yel ing over the sound of rushing wind.

'Sir,' one of the scientists shouted from the next row of controls. 'The airlocks just opened of their own accord. All the interior hatches have been blown.'

The Home Secretary was aghast. 'My god ... how?'

Greyhaven leant over the microphone and said calmly. 'Singh, this is at London. How did the airlocks open? Over.'

Ogilvy shook his head. 'There's a five minute delay, Lord Greyhaven, look at the clock.'

It was twenty-five past eleven. Singh had sent his message five

minutes ago. Greyhaven's question wouldn't arrive until half past. It had already happened.

'Can we close the airlocks from here?'

33

Theo Ogilvy ran over to one of the control panels, the one just in front of where Staines and Greyhaven had been standing all this time. 'The airlock override is here, but it will be five minutes before ... ' he stabbed the control, because it was the only thing that he could do.

Staines looked up to see Singh staring into the camera, his clothes whipping as the air from the cabin was blown out past him.

'London,' he croaked, trying to suck air into his lungs, 'There's nothing - '

He lost his grip, and was hurled backwards in a storm of loose items: plastic cups, clipboards, sheets of paper.

There were no signs of the other three astronauts.

'I've lost lifesigns from the Command Module.'

'Air pressure zero.'

There was absolute silence at mission control.

'It's over,' the Home Secretary whispered.

'No,' Greyhaven said, determined. 'We continue.'

'How?'

'We continue,' he repeated firmly.

***

Eve opened up the door to their hotel room with her keycard. With all the interviews and other footage in the can, they'd come back to the hotel, dropped the tapes off and had lunch - lamb, as Lord Greyhaven had suggested.

That afternoon they would take a taxi over to the editing suite they leased from one of the satel ite stations based in Docklands and edit everything into shape. One advantage of working in England was that

you could spend all day working on the report for the lunchtime news.

'I'm going to get this make-up off and have a shower,' Eve announced, holding the door open for Alan. He thanked her.

He and Eve had been working together for a couple of years, and this wasn't the first time that the cheapskate network had put them up in the same room. At least it was a twin room this time, and quite a large one. There was a chance for some privacy: not like that guest house in Berlin. It had always been awkward for Alan - he was a married man, and a pretty shy one at that. Alan never held anything back from his wife Melanie - he'd told her about the logistics of working abroad for a network who's foreign affairs desk was still trying to save money after spending so much covering the Gulf War. Melanie knew that it was part of her husband's job description to spend a lot of time alone in close quarters with his reporter.

'Unzip me, would you?' Alan obliged, and Eve stepped out of her dress.

She had danced semi-professional y while was at college and was used to getting undressed in front of other people. More than that, she had nothing to worry about when she did. Back home, Melanie read magazines full of pictures of thin, toned women and articles saying that she shouldn't worry because not everyone could look like a model. Melanie was good-looking, but she was a thirty-seven year old waitress with three kids. Eve was twenty-five with a hundred thousand dollars in the bank, a personal trainer and membership of a gym. When Alan was at home, he lay in bed with Melanie, telling his wife that she was the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen, but they both knew it wasn't true.

The funny thing was, Eve was more jealous of Melanie than the other way around. When they'd covered some event at EuroDisney, Alan and Eve had shared a double bed thanks to another booking error. They'd got drunk and had a big heart to heart. If nothing else it proved that their relationship was going to stay Platonic no matter what. Eve had told Alan that she envied him his wife, she didn't have anyone back home. Whenever she met someone now, she could never be sure whether they wanted her or her fame. So she stayed lonely.

Eve was standing there in that lace underwear she'd paid a thousand dollars for in Paris. Alan was the only person who had ever seen her in it.

'Alan ... ' she warned.

He frowned and looked around the room.

They had been burgled, by experts. They were both good at spotting the signs. As a matter of routine Eve left little bits of sticky tape on doors and on her suitcases to see if they'd been tampered with, and she was obsessive about noting exactly where she'd left her stuff. Over the years, Alan had begun to share this paranoia - it wasn't just mad dictators who didn't want their dirty little secrets exposed. In their time, Alan had had material stolen by the owners of a rat-infested old peoples' home and even by the manager of a fast-food restaurant who paid below minimum wage.

He was already checking his videotapes. 'Someone's been here, but they've not taken anything,' he announced.

The combination on the case had been altered, it had shifted slightly.

'The tapes could have been wiped.'

He shook his head. 'It's a hell of a lot easier to take them or smash them up. I'll check, though.'

Eve was looking through her notes and clippings. They'd picked the lock of her document wallet, but they hadn't removed a single disk or piece of paper.

'This is depressing,' Eve moaned.

'Why?'

'Nothing's been taken. Someone thought we were on to them, so they burgled our room, but they couldn't find a single thing. They didn't even trash the place to warn us off.'

Eve slumped on the bed.

34

Chesterton Road was a five-storey Georgian terrace that a hundred and fifty years ago would have been a row of town houses for affluent families. Since then times had changed and the rich had gone elsewhere - the buildings had been converted into flats, and regular maintenance had fallen by the wayside. Now the street had a vibrancy to it that the Victorians would have frowned on - the doors were

painted in a rainbow or different colours, and hanging baskets and bright pots were scattered around, brightening the place up even more.

The Doctor and Bernice had walked uphill from the tube station and quickly located the right road. Finding the green door after that was simple enough - it was about halfway along the street. If it hadn't been lunch time there would be builders up on the roof, dropping slates down the big plastic chute into a yel ow skip. The Doctor rang the doorbell.

The Doctor checked his watch. They were two minutes early.

The intercom buzzed. 'Come up. Flat Two,' a gruff voice told them.

The door unbolted itself. The hallway inside was unfurnished. Bernice followed him in and closed the door behind her.

'Upstairs,' she told him.

The Doctor climbed the stairs, two at a time. Bernice lagged behind. 'Do try to keep up,' he called down to her.

The door to Flat Two was at the top of the second flight of stairs. The door was already ajar. He walked in, brandishing his bunch of violets.

'Oh, at least knock,' he heard Bernice plead as she reached the top of the stairs.

The flat was small. Three rooms and a little hal way linking them.

First, the Doctor stepped into the kitchen. There was a neat little breakfast bar as well as a gas cooker and a big fridge-freezer. On the fridge door there were half a dozen photos and a couple of postcards. Happy smiling couples in a park. The Doctor moved aside to let the newly-arrived Bernice examine the pictures.

'That's him,' she said, pointing.

'Yes, I know,' the Doctor said impatiently. His fingers found something. A packet full of gold rings. He pressed one of them up to the polythene bag, and was disappointed to discover that they were just plastic.

'Curtain rings,' Bernice scowled.

'They might be important. Or they could come in useful.'

Bernice sighed. 'I suppose if we had to break into anywhere disguised as interior decorators ... '

The Doctor had pocketed the bag and had moved on to the next thing.

The door to the flat slammed shut behind them. Bernice looked worried by that, so he assured her that it had just been a gust of wind.

They went through into the front room, a combined bed/sitting room. A computer sat on a big desk in the corner, there was a small bookcase full of chunky computer manuals and square-bound magazines. A couple of posters were hanging there: a detail from the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel showing God and Adam and a black and white picture of Kermit the Frog in Calvin Klein underpants.

A sofa bed lay unfurled along one wall, a duvet with an Op-art pattern was arranged over it. The body of the young man who had passed the note to the Doctor lay half-in and half-out of the bed. His eyes were closed. The Doctor gently prised out the knife that had kil ed him, a single blow between the ribs to the heart.

Behind him, Bernice swore under her breath and began searching the room.

'There's a man dead here, Bernice,' the Doctor reprimanded her.

'And your fingerprints are now all over the murder weapon,' she replied, more than a hint of apprehension in her voice. She found a card with a magnetic strip and a photograph. 'His name was Timothy Todd, and he worked at the Space Centre at Devesham.'

The Doctor didn't look up. The man was so young, he couldn't long be out of university. 'A life has been taken here. He died less than five minutes ago. The murderer was still here when we rang the doorbel . That was his voice we heard.'

Bernice was opening up a plastic box full of computer disks. 'He must have been a programmer at the Space Centre.' Every single disk had been snapped in two then put back in the box.

'We have to tel the police,' the Doctor protested.

The sound of sirens was dopplering along the main street.

'Don't you see, Doctor? Someone's already told them. We've been set up. He worked at Space Centre, and he wanted to tell us something.'

'He already has,' the Doctor corrected her, 'Violets.'

'Very useful,' Bernice answered as she began hunting through the bookcase. 'Every cassette has been smashed, too.' She held up the tangled remains of Twang: More Than Thirty Years of John Smith and the Common Men.

'Commander Michaels said that there was a beautiful violet sky. Then five minutes later he said "Condition violet should now be in place, you've had your ten minutes".'

Bernice stopped in her tracks. 'A code phrase?'

The Doctor nodded. 'Telling Mission Control to cut the live feed because there was a problem that they couldn't tell the TV audience about.'

35

The Doctor stepped over to the window, laying the knife down on the desk. The sirens had stopped, which meant that the police had arrived. He narrowed his eyes. At the end of the street a patrol car had been parked behind a van, in an attempt to obscure it. Two uniformed officers, a PC and sergeant were making their way down this side of the street, again trying to keep out of view. There was no sign of any other police activity. They are responding to a 999 call.

Bernice was hunched over the magazine rack. 'But Tim passed you the note before then. It was while we were waiting for the astronauts to come out.'

'Yes,' the Doctor declared triumphantly. 'He knew that there was going to be a problem before Michaels did.'

'Who's Who and What's That?' Bernice gasped.

'Where?' the Doctor asked.

'No. It's a fanzine - for UFO-spotters and conspiracy theorists. I've seen copies of this at my dad's place. It's gone upmarket since 1983. Look, glossy paper and a colour cover.' She pulled it out of the magazine rack. The Doctor twisted his head to take a look at the cover. There was a photograph of a thundercloud over a ruined tower, and a bold caption: 'Storms Over Avallion: Exclusive Photos from Carbury'. Bernice held the magazine upright so that the Doctor could get a better look. Two computer disks plopped out.

One storey below them, the front door crashed open.

The Doctor dropped the violets, scooped up both the disks and pushed Bernice towards the door. 'Come on!'

They reached the door just seconds before the police did. Vital seconds. Without needing to be prompted, Bernice dived the other way, hurtling up the next flight of stairs. The police were stil too startled to react as the Doctor ran past them. They quickly regained their wits, and now one was shouting at them to stop, the other was calling for assistance.

Bernice had reached the end of the next landing, and she continued to climb. The Doctor's mind raced as he wondered what to do when they reached the top. If there was a firehose ...

The policeman chasing them was getting out of breath. The other had stayed behind to check the flat. Ahead of him, as she reached the next staircase, Bernice was also slowing. There were more sirens outside: a police inspector arriving with a couple of colleagues, possibly also an ambulance. Within ten minutes vanloads of uniformed men would surround the place.

They reached the top landing. It was identical to all the others, except that the door to the flats was missing.

Bernice ducked inside and the Doctor followed, the policemen behind swiping at him.

They were in roofspace, or would be if there was a roof. Skeletal wood beams arched over them, the road was fifty feet below. This being London there weren't any convenient flat roofs, everything sloped at an alarming angle.

Bernice hopped from duckboard to duckboard with the assurance of someone who hadn't thought through what she was doing. The Doctor followed her, trying to match her grace.

The policeman hesitated for the first time. 'Come down,' he called after them. He was staying firmly inside.

Bernice had reached the waste disposal chute.

'That's how we get down!' In one fluid movement she grabbed the edge of the chute, pulled her legs up and pushed herself down. The Doctor allowed her a couple of seconds, before following.

The Doctor bounced from the sides of the chute.

The surface was rough, composed of bucket-like segments. It was meant for bricks to drop down, not people, and whoever had designed it had clearly not worried too much about the state of the bricks at the end of the process.

The Doctor crashed into a mattress on top of a half-full skip, narrowly avoiding his companion.

Bernice groaned, pulling her dress back into a more decorous shape. Her hat had disappeared at some point and she was covered in bruises and grazes.

The Doctor produced a handkerchief and dusted her down. 'Are you all right?'

She rubbed her head, nodding. 'That'll teach me to come up with escape plans when I've spent the morning drinking champagne.'

The Doctor helped her upright. 'We were lucky there was a mattress.'

'No we weren't,' Bernice said enigmatical y.

A huge smile crossed the Doctor's face. 'The murderer ... the real murderer escaped this way. He would have passed us on the stairs otherwise. When did you work that out?'

'Somewhere between the third and second storey.'

He helped her clamber up and over the side of the skip. The Doctor managed to get out under his own steam.

Bernice was uninjured, and had no difficulty running. They walked straight past three empty police cars.

'We need to find a computer to read these disks,' Bernice said.

'Yes, in good time,' the Doctor replied. 'First of all, you need to change out of that dress.'

Bernice raised an eyebrow. 'Why?'

The Doctor clutched the lapels of his frock coat. 'My dear Bernice, you're far too conspicuous in that outfit.'

Chapter Five

The World At One

'This is the World at One, I'm James Naughtie. The headlines: "I'm on the surface chaps". The Mars 97 mission has reached the Red Planet. Much more on that in a moment. On a related but far less happy note, it has just been announced that the last Mars astronaut, Colonel Alexander Christian has escaped his high security prison and is on the loose in Kent. Police say that he is believed to be in the Canterbury area, and warn members of the public not to approach him, as he is armed and dangerous. Twenty years ago, "Lex" Christian savagely murdered his crew on the return journey from Mars with an axe. Police are ruling out the possibility that he was responsible for the death of Space Centre technician Timothy Todd, 23, who was found stabbed to death at his flat in South West London. They want to question a couple in their thirties who were in the area at the time.'

***

'What is the world coming to?' Alexander Christian sighed, stoking his pipe. They were sitting in the spacious lounge of Lethbridge-Stewart's house in Pyecombe. The Brig's wife was in the kitchen making a pot of tea and a spot of lunch. They'd been listening to the Test Series, but Lethbridge-Stewart wanted to check the news.

'They can't have any trace of you, Lex,' the Brigadier told him. 'That means that we can concentrate on the matter in hand. Now, what you encountered sounds very much like an Ice Warrior to me.'

Christian shifted in his sofa. The idea that Alistair had left the Scots Guards to fight aliens took a little getting used to. He'd heard of UNIT, of course, back when he was in the Space Service, but had always assumed it was a peacekeeping force or something of the sort. 'What's an Ice Warrior, then?'

'That's what Miss Grant called them.'

'Josephine Grant?'

'That's right. She was on my staff for a couple of years. Her uncle worked for the UN.'

'Good heavens, it's a small world. I knew her when she was doing her

A-Levels. I think she blames me for failing General Science.'

Doris Lethbridge-Stewart came in with a tray piled high with sandwiches. 'Talking about the good old days again, Alistair?' She was younger than her husband, but just as self-assured.

'You have a lovely pad here,' Christian told them, 'I didn't think that a Brigadier's pension would run to this.'

'That's a sore point,' Doris said sweetly. 'If they'd promoted him to General when he retired like they usual y would have done, it would be over ten grand more.'

'Spoken like a true economist,' Alistair chuckled. 'You see, Lex, my secret is out: I'm a kept man. Doris here inherited the place from an aunt, and her salary more than looks after the both of us.'

'I'm not working today because of the Mars Day holiday,' she explained. 'I'l probably put a couple of hours in with the laptop this afternoon, though.'

Christian smiled, pretending he understood what she was talking about.

'Whyever weren't you promoted?' Christian asked.

'Politics,' the Brigadier replied curtly. 'Now, let's get back to these Ice Warriors, shal we?'

Christian looked over to Doris. 'Is she ... ?'

'Am I security cleared?' Doris interjected, 'No, but I don't need to be. Once you've heard one story about how UNIT

didn't know what was going on until the Doctor turned up and saved the day you've heard them all.'

The Brig harrumphed. 'Actual y, Doris, we did manage by ourselves more times than not. The Doctor wasn't around when the Bandrils tried to destroy the ozone layer, was he?'

'No dear.' Clearly this was another sore nerve.

'We managed to beat the Drahvins without him, didn't we?'

'Yes dear, so you've said.'

'Well, then, there you go.'

'I'll just be in the study,' she said sweetly, kissing him on the temple. She took her mug and disappeared upstairs.

'Who is this Doctor, then?' Christian asked.

'He was my Scientific Advisor back in the seventies,' the Brigadier explained. 'He had ... particular expertise in the field of alien life forms. Miss Grant was his assistant for a short while.'

Christian had worked it out. 'So, she found out about the Martians while she was working with this boffin.'

'Yes that's right. Now, UNIT never encountered these chaps, but the Doctor and Miss Grant did on their travels. I always used to debrief her when she returned. Something to do with the planet Paladin, as I recall. It sticks in the memory because I remember Miss Grant tel ing me that at first the Doctor thought that these Ice Warriors were up to no good, but in the end it turned out they were on the side of the angels. It was usually the other way round.'

Christian shook his head. 'I've seen the fiends, Alistair. They are savage creatures, warlike. We infiltrated one of their cities - everything there is run like a barracks. As far as I could gather, these Martians were fighting a rival group. You should see their weapons and what they can do with them.'

The Brigadier took a swig of tea. 'It makes you wonder what the Martians would make of it if they landed in Bosnia.

Or Belfast, for that matter.'

***

The Doctor smiled benignly at Sal, the shop assistant at the boutique. The radio news was being piped out of the shop's PA system, but the young woman wasn't paying attention to it as the detailed descriptions of the two murder suspects were read out, right down to Bernice's ballgown.

'Are you going to be much longer?' the Doctor asked his companion.

'I'm done now,' the voice came from behind the changing room

curtain. It swished back to reveal Bernice in a pair of jeans and a bright orange polo-neck shirt.

'Not terrifically original, but stick to what you know, that's what I say. I'll wear these now, but I'll need a bag for my old stuff,' she informed the assistant, handing over the bar tags.

'OK. How will you be paying?'

'Doctor ... '

The Doctor rummaged in his pockets and produced the money.

Bernice was hovering over the jewel ery rack. 'Hey, it's ages since I wore these.' She tossed a big pair of gold hoop earrings onto the counter. 'These, too, please.'

The Doctor took out the last of his money.

Bernice put the earrings on as they walked out of the shop. The Doctor took the bag with the ballgown in it. 'Are you sure we can't get back to the TARDIS?' she asked.

The Doctor shook his head. 'It's right outside the National Space Museum. We'd never get across the Square without being spotted. We'll have to find a computer elsewhere.'

She took the bag back from him. 'Getting access to one can't be that difficult, even in 1997.'

The Doctor drummed his fingers over his mouth. 'No, no, not at all. The trouble is that we don't know how long we'l need to study the data. We need somewhere like a library or a university.'

'How about an Internet Cafe?' Bernice suggested, from halfway across the street. She was heading to a shop with a bright neon sign flashing on and off.

'A what?' the Doctor asked, following her across.

He stepped into what would have been an ordinary cafe, except for the personal computer sitting on each table.

The place was about half-full. Its proprietor, an overweight little man, stood behind a gleaming counter, his attention occupied by the big wall-mounted television. The Doctor followed his gaze, fascinated by what he saw on the screen. A man in odd clothes and a woman in a

tailored suit were standing in an American street. He was trying to convince her that he was a time traveller and that in the next twenty-four hours the world would come to an end. She thought he was mad.

'What is that?' the Doctor asked, a little worried. The time travel er seemed sincere enough.

'Twelve Monkeys,' the cafe owner said. 'Cool film. It's just come out on sel -through. How can I help?'

'We'd like a couple of cups of tea and access to a computer terminal.'

'Sure.' He passed over the price list. 'Have you surfed the net before?'

'Not like this, no.' The Doctor admitted, searching his pockets. 'I've only got ten pence,' he announced.

The cafe owner shrugged. 'Looks like you won't be losing your net virginity this afternoon, then.' He turned his attention back to the movie.

'We don't have money?' Bernice asked, aghast.

'We spent it al on your clothes.'

'You should have said.'

The proprietor glared at them. 'If you can't pay, could you at least keep quiet? This is a good bit.'

'If you'll excuse us one moment,' the Doctor said, smiling. He took his companion to one side. 'Couldn't you ...

persuade him?'

'How?' Bernice scowled.

'Well, you're not a little girl anymore...'

'I beg your pardon?' she snapped, before remembering the urgency of the situation. She bit her lip. 'OK.'

Bernice leant forward, and flashed her eyes at the proprietor, who dragged himself away from his movie. 'I don't have any money, but I think I have something you might find of interest.' She lent forward

and whispered into his ear, before pulling back. 'Do you want that?' Bernice asked softly.

'If you'l do that for me,' the fat little man said in all seriousness, 'then you can have as much connect time as you want, and free cappuccinos.'

***

'I'm on the surface, chaps'. Two other astronauts followed him out, and they spent some time bouncing around, getting used to the idea that they were on an alien planet. 'Keep that camera pointing that way, Bob. There's a beautiful violet sky,'

Eve yawned. After the tenth time, even men on Mars lost their novelty value. 'Top the report with it.'

'Yeah, you're right,' Alan conceded, stabbing the pause button. 'Then establishing shots of the museum. Your commentary over that leading to the interview with the Mission Controller ... '

'Theo Ogilvy.'

'Ogilvy, that's it. Cut out his waffle, concentrate on the technical stuff, then finish with Greyhaven.'

'No, no,' Eve objected, 'Finish on me updating the progress - we want it to be current. I'll phone the office at the Space Centre and get the latest news just before we do the uplink.'

Alan rewound the tape. 'Any word on where we're going next?'

'Kyle wanted me to investigate the Loch Ness Monster.'

'I hope you told him to - '

'I did, Alan, don't worry. I'm not get lumbered with al that "Real-life X Files" crap. I convinced him that we should do a feature on Lord Greyhaven.'

Alan looked up, a smirk on his face. 'Did you indeed?'

'The guy's a national hero here, and he's pretty big back in the States, too. Remember him on Nightline? He lives in a stately home, but he's a brilliant scientist and a billionaire businessman. Good pictures, topical. People need heroes nowadays.'

'Wow, yeah, he's sort of a cross between Batman and Alfred the butler. And luckily he gave you the number for that flashing red phone of his.'

'That too,' she laughed, 'and don't even think of bringing the Bat-Pole into the conversation right now. We'll get this done, then check the file on Greyhaven, see what we can find.'

'Sure. Whatever.' Alan turned back to the screen.

***

'Bernice, I don't think that man has ever been so happy in his life.' The Doctor said as he typed in the guest log-in.

'He's got Jason to thank for the last half hour.' Benny slotted the first disk into the drive.

'Really?' The program manager came up. The Doctor double-clicked on the right icon.

'Oh yes, I did all sorts of things with Jason that I'd never have dreamt of doing before. Going to an all-night Star Trek movie festival was one of them. I'm amazed that I could remember so much about the plots of the ninth and tenth films. We might not have any money, but that's the sort of information money can't buy. I've not just altered the web of time or anything, have I?'

'I wouldn't have thought so,' the Doctor murmured. 'And two-thirds of the way through the tenth film ... '

Benny nodded. 'Yes. It's very poignant. They knew it was his last one, you see. They could get away with al sorts of stuff.'

Pictures and text scrol ed across the screen. Benny could tell straight away that it was a map of Mars. The information was gradually becoming more detailed. Final y the Mission Badge flashed up onto the screen, along with a caption: SEALED ORDERS. MISSION DIRECTIVES. APPROVED 2/1/97.

A huge smile spread across the Doctor's face. 'These are satellite photos taken by Mariner and the Hubble Telescope of the Martian surface. This shows the landing zone and the parameters of the geological survey.' The picture zoomed in on the Mare Sirenum.

'Timothy Todd knew that there was going to be trouble. So he must have already known about the archway.'

They scanned the screen for a minute or so, eventual y agreeing where the arch would be located. There was no sign of it on the pictures.

'How well do you know that area, Bernice?'

Benny shrugged. 'It was ten years ago, and I was underground a lot of the time.'

'What about the War?'

Ninety years from now, Earth and Mars would fight the Thousand Day War. Bernice had been born in the twenty-sixth century, and by then the War was ancient history. It was still infamous for its particular brand of brutality: millions of human troops over-ran Mars, driving the natives to the brink of extinction with weapons that had long been banned on Earth. ‘Fighting was mostly concentrated around Olympus Mons - where Jackson City is now.

There weren't any active nests under the Mare Sirenum, and it was on the wrong side of the Vallis Marineris, so it escaped nuclear attack. That's one of the reasons our expedition went there.'

The Doctor pointed at the monitor. 'So the terrain is much the same in the twentieth and twenty-sixth centuries.

The Lander is there. They've just gone underground. So where did they end up? Are they close to where your expedition went?'

Benny nodded. 'They are right in the heart of the Fields of the Dead. Virtually every cavern there has a tomb in it.'

'I thought the Martian Lords were cremated on funeral pyres.'

'Funeral customs change. At one point Marshals were entombed in insulated pyramids. It was a status symbol: water is rare on Mars. The Marshals were frozen inside coffin-sized blocks of ice, then sealed into the crystal spires.'

'So water is a sign of material wealth on Mars. Like the Pharaohs surrounding their mummies with gold?'

'Exactly the same, and the ritual has the same origin.'

'Yes.' The Doctor's eyes were shut as he tried to assemble al the

information. Final y, they snapped open and the Doctor swiftly slipped the second disk into the drive.

'Timothy knew there was going to be trouble, but there aren't any clues on that first disk. So he left us two disks.'

The Mission Badge flashed up, along with the caption: SEALED ORDERS. MISSION DIRECTIVES. APPROVED

12/12/96.

'The same information?' Benny asked.

'This was completed three weeks before,' the Doctor muttered. His eyes narrowed. 'More than that: look, originally the Lander was going to go to the Sinus Sabaeus.'

Benny leant over, struggling to remember her Martian geography. 'That's thousands of kilometres away from the Mare Sirenum. I don't know much about it, they aren't of any archaeological interest, in my time it’s one big retirement vil age. The nearest I ever went was the casinoplex at Deucalionis.'

The Doctor rubbed his chin. 'So the landing site was changed, just before the launch, and the astronauts were ordered away from an unpopulated area right into the heart of one jam-packed with subterranean Martian buildings.'

'Wait a minute,' Benny objected, 'We didn't know about the Fields of Death until we got there in 2565, so there's no way anyone in 1997 could know about them.'

The Doctor looked at her. 'You'd think that, wouldn't you? It's something of a coincidence, though.'

'Are you saying that the astronauts knew they would find the tombs?'

The Doctor frowned. 'No. Commander Michaels was genuinely surprised. But someone at Space Centre knew what was going on. Someone who uncovered evidence of Martian civilisation on the Mare Sirenum twenty years ago. They have kept that information secret for a generation. Whoever it is is prepared to kill to keep it a secret.

They killed the man who gave us these disks, and al he seems to know is that the landing site was changed. We have to tell the authorities.'

Benny took a deep breath. 'No-one's going to listen to us while we're murder suspects. I get the feeling that if we end up in a police cel we won't get to cal our lawyers for a very long time.'

40

The Doctor leapt from his seat, flinging his chair back. 'We can cal UNIT!' he shouted.

Benny was on her feet, her finger over her mouth. 'UNIT the top secret organisation?' she whispered.

The Doctor looked crestfal en. 'Yes. They'll have the facilities to analyse the soil samples, too. I think we're getting going to the bottom of this.'

There was a pay phone tucked away in the corner of the cafe. They stepped up to it. The Doctor fished out his 10p piece and lifted the handset. He paused. 'There's one problem: I don't know their number.'

Benny rolled her eyes.

'Well, I can't just cal directory enquiries, can I?' the Doctor retorted, as if it was her fault. 'No-one's meant to know that they exist.'

'There must be someone you can call.'

The Doctor stared wildly for a moment, then clicked his fingers. 'Of course, yes. Why didn't I think of him earlier?

Hold out your hands.'

Benny did as he asked. The Doctor was rummaging through his pockets and producing his usual assortment of junk: a cricket ball, an elephant feather, a bag of kola nuts, a big bal of string, a piece of the True Cross, even a dog whistle. He handed everything but the string to Benny. Final y he found what he was searching for: a piece of vellum. On the front was a letter written in the Doctor's handwriting. A couple of strings of numbers and characters were scrawled in felt-tip on the back.

The Doctor dialled the first of the numbers.

Before the first ring, Benny thought of something and quickly cut the connection.

'Bernice!' the Doctor cried.

'We can't phone him,' Benny insisted. 'He used to be a senior military man, with access to the deepest, darkest secrets of the twentieth century. Hell, there are things that he saw that stil haven't been declassified in my time.'

The Doctor frowned. 'I know that. I was there, too. That's why we're phoning him.'

'So don't you think there's a good chance that his line will be tapped?'

The Doctor's shoulders had slumped, like a child who'd just been told he couldn't have an ice cream. 'Yes,' he conceded.

'I'm sorry, but we can't get in touch with him. They've seen both of us. We can't risk implicating him. They could kill him.'

Suddenly the Doctor's sad eyes were wide open. 'The other number, what a stroke of luck!'

He dashed across the room and flopped in front of an unused terminal, straightening out the parchment. He began tapping out the number.

***

'Yes, Prime Minister. No, everything is running very smoothly in your absence. Everything is going to plan. How are our American cousins? Excellent. Talk to you tomorrow. Goodbye.'

Staines passed the handset to his PPS, who replaced it. 'That was the Prime Minister.'

'Yes, Home Secretary,' the civil servant replied understandingly.

'Just checking up to make sure you were running his country properly?' the gruff-voiced man in the trench coat asked. He and his colleague had arrived halfway through the conversation. He was holding the samples case.

Staines grimaced. 'Something like that, yes. As you heard, I told him that everything was going to plan.'

All four men in the room laughed.

'Won't NASA be monitoring the transmissions from Mars?' the PPS asked. 'They'll know about the Lander.'

The gruff-voiced man chuckled. 'Over the years, we've got the hang of

jamming the lads at Cape Canaveral.

They'll be getting signals that they think are from Mars.'

'Frightfully advanced technology, Simon,' Staines assured him.

'Actually, Home Secretary, the technology's been around since the seventies. We developed it at the time of the Viking missions and it's stood us in good stead since then. Remember the Mars Observer a couple of years ago?'

Staines didn't. 'The upshot is that the Americans don't know about what happened to either the Lander or the Orbiter.'

'The Orbiter?' the gruff-voiced man said.

'Yes, there was a terrible accident with the airlocks. The whole crew was killed.'

The other man shifted uncomfortably. 'But the plan was to - '

'It was an accident,' the Home Secretary snapped. 'I regret losing any more astronauts than we had to, and I appreciate that it makes things more complicated. I also regret having Alexander Christian running around the country terrorising people. The plan will still go ahead.'

'But without the Martian artefacts - '

'But we have come too far to stop now. The alien technology would have been nice, it would have cut some corners, but we can still achieve our objectives without them.'

The Home Secretary took the sample case from the big man and checked it.

'Good work.' He took a couple of the test tubes and put them in his breast pocket.

'Is there any sign of Christian?' the other man asked.

'Not yet, no,' the Home Secretary replied, more than a hint of irritation in his voice. 'He could be a problem. And after all that trouble we've gone to prevent any leaks from the Space Centre.'

'He's too late to do anything now,' the gruff-voiced man grunted. 'Who

can stop us now?'

***

Bambera slit open the seal on file CCC and began to read. The sensitivity of the document meant that she was sitting in the 'reading room' of the UNIT HQ records department and that she had been searched to make sure she wasn't carrying a pen or a camera. She was the only person in the building, perhaps in the country, with the security clearance to read it, so she couldn't get some eager young corporal to do this damn research job for her.

The windowless room was little bigger than a cupboard, and was bare apart from a desk and wooden chair that scraped the floor whenever it moved.

The file was quite a fat one compared with the few others that Bambera had read from the seventies. UNIT had been in joint charge of security at the old Space Centre with the Space Security Department at the time of some flap. It took her an hour to establish that one of the early Mars Probes had made contact with an intelligent species on the surface of Mars. Initially, there was something of a misunderstanding, and the BEMs had kidnapped three human astronauts, but after that there had been peaceful contact with them. The business had Lethbridge-Stewart and the Doctor's fingers al over it.

"The aliens returned to their own star system."

They weren't from Mars, then? Bambera found the 'Know Your Enemy' summary.

Subject: Name Unknown.

Planet of Origin: Unknown

Social Structure: Unknown

History: Unknown

There wasn't a photograph or even an artist's impression.

Bambera eventual y found the threat assessment.

"The Ambassadors are thousands of years more advanced than us. It was clear at our last meeting that they are quite capable of destroying

al life on this planet, but they chose not to on that occasion. A small team of academics and scientists have made some cultural exchanges with the Ambassadors. One of the few things the team has determined is that the Ambassadors feel that our race is not ready to share the secrets of their advanced science. Further contact is limited by the fact that the Ambassadors are a plutonium-based lifeform. Any direct physical contact with them is lethal to human life. The team's opinion is that we can offer no effective defence against the Ambassadors if they turn hostile. Their ships are several miles long and capable of projecting immeasurably powerful beams of energy."

Something was appended to the document.

"3/6/80. Transmission received from the Ambassadors. 'Our survey is complete. We are leaving this solar system.'

Astronomers report a large object leaving Martian orbit for interstellar space at great speed."

There had been no contact with them since then.

Brigadier Bambera realised that she had wasted the last three hours of her life.

***

Eve had just phoned Mission Control, and apparently they had not demonstrated any of that British politeness. As she told Alan, it was a complete change of policy since this morning, when the Brits had bent over backwards for the news crews - helping to arrange interviews, issuing all the journos with a glossy press pack.

Alan had got hold of mugs, T-shirts and even a couple of model kits for his kids. When it had come to interviews and the press conference, they'd answered every question with a handy soundbite.

But when Eve had phoned them to ask for a mission update, the woman at the other end simply read out a curt pre-prepared statement that said nothing except about the landing itself. When Eve had tried to press the point, the woman at the National Space Museum had put the phone down on her.

Alan wasn't too worried: it had saved him a job - their report was now complete, without the need to tape an update. It would be ready for

the satellite uplink in five minutes.

Eve was on the phone to Lord Greyhaven, chatting to him as if they were old High School pals. The way she was twirling the cord of the phone around her finger only made her look more like an excited schoolgirl. Final y, she put the phone down and hurried over.

'I have to love you and leave you. Lord Greyhaven wants to talk to me about this feature.' She paused for effect.

'Over dinner.'

'Hey, I'l come along, discuss some shots with him,' he joked.

'You'l be OK, won't you?' she asked, with a serious expression on her face.

'Sure - I'm sure I'll survive on my own here, even if there are only five TV channels. I might check out that Thai place round the corner from the hotel, I hear it's real good.'

'Don't wait up!' she called, scooping up her handbag and almost running out the door. She almost bumped into an unkempt young man who sauntered into the suite. He took Alan by the hand.

'American news network, right?'

'Yeah, hi.' Alan stood up.

'My name's Oswald. Have you noticed yet?'

'Noticed what?'

'Run the VT. Look closely this time.'

Alan shrugged and played back the report again. As the astronauts began jumping around the surface, something caught his eye. He paused the picture and stared at the screen.

'It can't be ...'

'Yes it can.'

Alan switched on the printer and ran off a screen grab.

***

'Alistair, darling, you have a new email message.'

The Brigadier brightened. 'I'll be right there,' he cal ed up the stairs. 'Be back in a moment,' he told Christian.

Lethbridge-Stewart climbed the stairs, a little more stiffly than once he would have, and found Doris sitting in her study, surrounded by her bookcases. The light in here was excel ent, and that was important when she spent so long staring at that computer screen. The sun shone through her hair, and she looked lovely. The mood was broken somewhat by the strains of the Neighbours theme tune coming from the little portable set that Doris kept up here.

He clapped his hands together. 'Where's my message then, Doris?' His wife might get a dozen messages a day from her office, other companies and fellow dwellers on the Internet, but the Brigadier considered himself fortunate if he got one message a week.

Doris got out of her seat for him. 'In your folder, as always.'

'Right you are.' He reached out for the mouse and used it to move the arrow on the screen until it was over the right place. He pressed the little button on top of the mouse.

'Double-click,' Doris prompted.

'I know,' the Brigadier said irritably, correcting his mistake. It was a little awkward with his hands.

The message came up. Alistair might have gradually been losing his other faculties, but his eyesight was still pin-sharp.

' "Encrypted File"?' the Brigadier asked, 'Is this from the UN?'

Doris shook her head. 'Not necessarily. Quite a lot of businesses scramble their messages, and virtually everyone has access to the software.'

'Can we decode it?'

'The computer's already done that for you, look. Who's "Bernice Summerfield", then?' his wife asked, 'An old flame?'

'No skeletons in the cupboard there, Doris. Miss Summerfield is a friend of the Doctor's from a long time ago. This message comes from

him.'

'Really? Not an axe-murderer, then?'

The Brigadier felt his stomach churn.

'Alistair, I've just been watching the news. That's Alexander Christian downstairs, for heaven's sake.'

'Lex was in the Scots Guards with me. When I was promoted to Brigadier, he was made Colonel in my place. He's a bril iant pilot, one of the best tacticians I've ever met. I wanted him in UNIT, but the Space Service made a move for him first.'

'You trust him?'

'Yes.'

'Then I trust him. I'm going to hide our axe, though.' Doris put her hand on his shoulder. 'I trust you, darling, I'm sure you've got your reasons for bringing him here, I just wish that you'd told me.'

Lethbridge-Stewart nodded. 'I'm sorry. This message is more bad news. It looks as if the Doctor's got himself into a bit of a scrape and he needs my help.'

'Where is he?'

'London. Lex and I had better meet him there, straight away.'

'So you won't be home for dinner?'

Alistair kissed her on the cheek. ‘I’m afraid England needs me.’

Chapter Six

Close Encounters

The lift door slid smoothly open and Eve Waugh stepped out into Lord Greyhaven's office. She hadn't known what to expect of it - the headquarters of Greyhaven's company, EG, was an unprepossessing Victorian edifice near the Old Bailey. On the way up she had pictured the office one of two ways. It could have been a room like Sherlock Holmes' with antiques on the mantelpiece, leather-bound chairs and oil paintings on the wall. Either that or a chrome and steel symphony of state-of-the-art technology with a wall of flatpanel TVs. In the event it was a messy compromise of both styles that was rather less than the sum of its parts.

From this building, from this room, EG, a multinational string of electronics companies, component manufacturers and the like all across Europe were al co-ordinated. It wasn't a large company by international standards, but it was influential. The company's main asset was its chairman, who was standing by the window, talking to a couple of men in trench coats. His office gave an impressive view out over St Paul's Cathedral.

'That wil be all,' he told the two men. There was a bulky canvas kit bag on the desk, which the taller of the two men took with him as he left. 'Oh, could you ask Adele to bring in a pot of coffee?' Greyhaven cal ed after them.

'Very good, Lord Greyhaven,' the tall man responded gruffly. He glanced at the new arrival appreciatively as he passed her.

'Good afternoon, Eve,' Greyhaven said.

'Hi.' She looked around the office, taking it in. The desk was mahogany, and looked like an antique. 'This room is a lot smal er than I thought it would be.'

'We British are a modest race, Eve: we don't share the American taste for ostentation.'

'You're a bil ionaire, sir, I think you're allowed to buy yourself a new carpet.'

'I'm only a *dollar* billionaire,' he noted lightly, removing a couple of tumblers and a decanter from a smal cabinet.

She moved towards the high-backed chair in front of the desk.

Greyhaven chuckled, pointing over her shoulder. There was a closed white door.

'I have a flat... an *apartment* here. It's a little less formal. You don't mind that?'

'No, not at all,' she said in a giddy-schoolgirl voice that she immediately regretted.

Greyhaven walked over to the door and held it open for Eve.

'Again, not very large, but a useful pied-á-terre. It makes commuting to work easy, if nothing else.'

The room was almost filled by a vast leather sofa and a low glass table, much of the rest of the space was taken up by a little kitchen unit. Two doors led off: bathroom and bedroom, Eve guessed.

They walked over to the sofa together. Greyhaven sat down; Eve hovered for a moment. There was another good view of the Thames from here. Hanging on the wall was a neat row of photographs: Greyhaven with other senior politicians and scientists and various social events and public occasions.

'Is that the Queen? Sorry, that's a really dumb question.'

He watched her as she scrutinised them. 'A touch of ostentation, I'm afraid.'

The same fine middle-aged woman appeared on a couple of the photographs. 'Your wife?'

He smiled. 'Yes. Sit down.' He was pouring a generous double whisky for her. She sat close to him and took a sip of the whisky. As she had expected, it was the best she'd ever tasted.

'Does your wife know?' she asked.

Greyhaven arched his eyebrow. 'Know what?'

She leant over him, kissing his cheek, a little awkwardly.

***

'Doctor!'

The Brigadier came jogging across the park. Behind him was a flash of yel ow. Yes! - it was Bessie, the sprightly yel ow roadster which the Doctor had used as transport while on Earth, a long time ago now. The Brigadier had taken good care of the car over the years.

A tall man the Doctor didn't recognise was sitting in the passenger seat. The Doctor and Bernice hurried towards the Brigadier, both checking the small park for anyone who might have seen the old soldier arrive. They met around a hundred yards from the car. Lethbridge-Stewart was a little out of breath, and far too formal a chap to want a hug. They shook hands instead.

'You recognise me?' the Doctor asked as they set off for the car.

'Of course. You were wearing that face in Hong Kong, remember?'

The Doctor boggled. 'I was?'

'You must remember Hong Kong back in '88, when we discovered the secret of the Embodiment of Gris.'

'I didn't even know that there *was* an Embodiment of Gris,' Bernice muttered.

The Doctor looked blankly at his old friend. 'I think that must have happened in my future.'

The Brigadier chortled. A couple of decades ago, the Doctor would have needed to explain such a temporal paradox in more detail. Nowadays, Alistair was almost relaxed discussing them. After all he'd been through, he knew as much as anyone how convoluted time travel could become.

The Brigadier reached over to shake Bernice's hand. 'Good afternoon, Miss Summerfield. Now - I've aged twenty years since the last time we met, but you haven't.'

She smiled weakly.

'Bernice has got married since then, Alistair - you and Doris came to the wedding.'

'Really? That was in my future, I take it, Mrs - ?'

'I'm still a Summerfield.' Bernice was a little uncomfortable discussing

her marriage. It was going through a bad patch at the moment, the Doctor remembered. 'And yes, it was in the future: 2010.'

The Brigadier looked a little surprised. 'I'm still around in thirteen years time, then?'

'Not only that,' Bernice assured him, 'you've never looked better.'

The Brigadier grimaced. 'That's what people have started saying to me now. I imagine it means that I'm on the way out. God knows what I'l be like a couple of decades from now.'

'Old soldiers never die, Alistair,' the Doctor said softly.

'Neither do Time Lords, Doctor, eh? Now, you two, about these Ice Warriors...'

The Doctor and Bernice both stopped and stared at him.

The Brigadier looked like the cat that got the cream. 'That is what you were about to tell me, I take it?'

They had reached the car and the Doctor recognised the Brigadier's companion. 'You're full of surprises today, Alistair.'

'You're Alexander Christian,' Bernice announced, betraying some considerable discomfort. 'I've just been reading about you.'

'Nothing bad, I hope?' he asked lightly. The Doctor found himself grinning and shaking his hand.

'It seems that Mr Christian has been misjudged.' The Brigadier clambered in to the back seat. 'You drive, Doctor.'

'I was framed,' Christian explained. 'I found out things on Mars that I shouldn't have done. I'll tell everyone when we get to UNIT.'

The Brigadier had got comfortable, and was clearing a space for Bernice. 'We're only five minutes away from UNIT's London Office here. After your email message, I phoned Bambera. They're expecting us.'

'Well,' the Doctor said breezily, 'we mustn't keep Winifred waiting.' He located the ignition podule and started the engine.

***

The two men dressed as workmen reached the roof of the National Space Museum.

Pigeons scattered as they walked towards the edge of the roof.

'Dish Seven,' the gruff voiced one announced.

His col eague nodded, taking a pair of clippers from the pocket of his overalls.

'I don't understand why we still need to do this.'

'Neither do I. That isn't going to stop me.'

They located the dish, identifying it by the little panel screwed to the back. Together, they unplugged the coaxial cable at the back.

The gruff voiced man opened up his canvas kit bag and removed a brass cylinder the size of a Thermos flask. It was surprisingly light, with a socket at either end and a neat row of switches along its side. He adjusted the settings, then plugged it into the dish. His colleague connected the other end to the cable.

They eased the device into place, tucking it out of sight.

***

A bright yel ow vintage car turned into an anonymous-looking car park underneath an imposing Whitehall office block.

In a third-floor window opposite, one of the watchers took a photograph, the other made a note into a dictaphone.

'Six oh-five. Four entering. Three male, one female. Yellow vintage car, make unknown, registration Whisky Hotel Oscar Eight.'

***

Alan watched Oswald on the floor of the editing suite, rummaging through Eve's press pack. He'd seen the contents for himself at the Museum, when they'd been handing out the packs. Glossy photographs of the crew, with biographies on the back; maps of Mars; artist's impressions of what a Mars Colony might look like; description of Mars. Alan saw the piece of paper that he wanted, a glossy card bearing a diagram of a space suit.

Alan and Oswald pulled it out, placing it alongside the screen grab

he'd printed off. He ran his finger along the blurred image. Oswald showed Alan the air line. A corrugated white tube, the diameter of a vacuum cleaner hose.

A hose that on the picture in front of him had come free from its socket and was flapping about.

It was a single frame of videotape. With the air line disconnected, the next few seconds should have seen the astronaut collapse, gasping for air. His blood vessels would have burst, and his eyes would have started to bulge as though he was being strangled. His colleagues should have bounced over, trying to keep themselves from panicking. They'd be slotting the pipe back into place, pulling him back to the Lander, knowing that it was already too late to prevent permanent brain damage.

That wasn't how it had happened. The astronaut had bounced out of shot like a kid in a playground, live on a billion television screens.

'See?' Oswald said excitedly. 'Whatever that guy is breathing, it didn't come from the tanks on his back.'

'The pictures are fakes,' Alan said incredulously. These pictures of British astronauts that they'd all been watching on TV a few hours ago weren't taken on Mars at all.

'That's not true. The Mars 97 is real enough, in fact those pictures prove it. The Apollo missions were faked by Disney, sure, everyone knows that, but - '

Alan rounded on him, almost yel ing the information on the press sheet he had just found.' "The Martian atmosphere is chiefly carbon dioxide, with virtually no oxygen or hydrogen. Some scientists believe that it might, in the long term, be possible to make the Martian atmosphere like that of Earth. This process is called 'terraforming', and a number of experiments wil be carried out on the Mars 97 mission." Explain that.'

Oswald snorted. 'You believe that propaganda?'

Alan turned on him. 'As a matter of fact, yes I do believe a wealth of scientific evidence over some fruitcake who thinks that the world's flat and that Elvis had crash-landed at Roswell.'

'I love you too, Alan.'

'How do you explain the fact that that man is breathing *nitrogen* and he isn't dead?'

'The Martian atmosphere is breathable. Thin but breathable. Why do you think the British government would invest billions of pounds trying to set up a colony on a planet without a breathable atmosphere?'

'It says that here that they will terraform it.'

'Alan, listen to what you are saying. Even heard of the ozone hole? Mars' atmosphere is one big ozone hole. If British scientists could fix an ozone hole and turn the main greenhouse gas into lovely fresh oxygen, they'd fix the atmosphere we've got down here first.'

Alan ignored him. 'The Mars 97's a fake, like that Di video last year. The whole Mars Project is just another crummy British sci-fi drama. This is the story of the decade.'

A billion people had seen those pictures; he couldn't be the only one to spot that the astronaut hadn't done his suit up properly. He couldn't be the only cameraman who'd spent the last few hours staring at the picture.

He couldn't wait for Eve.

***

They were in the briefing room deep in the heart of the UNIT Offices in London. Bambera had ushered them all down here, where her senior officers - two captains, two sergeants - were waiting.

Brigadier Lethbridge-Stewart looked around the room. It was a far cry from his day when budgets were tight and he, Benton and Yates could solve the world's problems with a mug of cocoa each and a telephone between them.

This was just the Whitehall Office - heaven knew what UNIT HQ looked like now.

A long, black conference table ran the length of the room. The far wall was a bank of video screens of various sizes. Scrol ing readouts, video pictures and computer graphics were constantly flashing up and renewing themselves. The Doctor and Mrs Summerfield had supplied

some of the information: computer disks with Mars data, given to them by some chap at the Space Centre. Two sets of near-identical data were flashing all over the place. It was al terribly confusing.

A prim young corporal was sitting at the far end of the desk, tapping instructions into a keyboard that controlled the displays.

Alistair looked around at the three people he'd brought along. Bernice sat to his left, looking a little uncomfortable.

The Doctor paced the room for a moment, before realising that he was also meant to be seated. Both seemed out of place in such a spotless, disciplined place. Alexander Christian sat at Lethbridge-Stewart's right side, much more at ease. The Captain to his right was more nervous.

Bambera stood in front of the multimedia display. 'OK. Here's how I see the situation. There was some flap at the Space Centre. The astronauts discovered a doorway made by extraterrestrials. Since then, there's been a clampdown at Mission Control. I've been trying to get them to return my calls for five hours now, and they won't. A couple of press contacts say they've had no luck, either.'

'If they've encountered evidence of alien life, they're doing the right thing to keep it secret,' one of the Captains noted.

Bambera nodded. 'I agree - and it wouldn't be the first time that the British government had covered up ETs and kept UNIT out of the loop. So I phoned NUIT HQ, Paris and got them to listen in on the Mars transmissions.

Corporal - '

The Corporal control ing the display pressed a control on the desk and the loudspeakers began burbling with standard comms traffic between the Lander and Orbiter. The voices of the astronauts would pipe up every so often. Everything sounded perfectly normal.

'This is a live feed. They haven't even mentioned the archway, so it didn't lead anywhere interesting. End of story.

Right?'

'Wrong,' the Doctor declared. Now he was sitting draped over a chair, his feet on the desk. 'When did the astronauts enter the tomb?' he asked the room.

'About ten fifteen,' Bambera supplied.

The Doctor peered at the clock - it was twenty past six.

47

He leapt to his feet. 'We have a little under forty hours before the invasion.'

'Invasion?!' Lethbridge-Stewart was not the only person to express his surprise at the Doctor's pronouncement.

He knelt down by Summerfield, grabbing her shoulders, staring straight into her eyes. 'You know your Martian culture, Bernice. What's the punishment for tomb robbery?'

'Disturbing the tomb of a Marshal is just about the worst sacrilege under Martian ecclesiastical law,' she said.

Lethbridge-Stewart found himself picturing little green men in dog collars.

The Doctor was nodding his head. 'It's the human equivalent of bursting into Westminster Abbey and digging the place up with a bul dozer.'

'I suppose,' she conceded, aware that everyone in the room was staring at her. Lethbridge-Stewart smiled encouragement at her. The spark of recognition passed between them - *here the Doctor goes again*.

'So what's the penalty?' the Brigadier prompted her gently.

'Anyone caught in there would face summary execution.' Summerfield realised what she was saying. 'Those astronauts are dead.'

Something pulsed at the very back of Lethbridge-Stewart's brain, primal sorrow for the astronauts, their families, the whole human race.

'Yes,' the Doctor was insisting, 'But it's worse than that. The Martians don't just punish the criminals, do they?'

Summerfield blanched. 'The robbers' entire clan would also face retribution: massive reparations, the loss of territory and industrial facilities.'

The Doctor addressed the room like a prosecuting counsel. 'Those

astronauts have stirred up a hornet's nest.

Without knowing it, they have just condemned the entire human race to death. Warships wil already be on their way.'

One of the Captains laughed, the same that had spoken before. He was a young lad, with blond hair. 'And you've got evidence for that, I suppose?' He'd probably only just been seconded to UNIT, he still had that swaggering scepticism that all the new recruits had for the first couple of months.

'He has, Captain Ford,' Bambera nodded. 'Eye witness evidence. I saw them entering a cave myself. Space Centre denied that ever happened, they threw me out when I tried to watch the video link. In the absence of any other explanation, and in the light of his experience, I am prepared to entertain the Doctor's assertion that the astronauts found a Martian tomb.'

'What about the radio transmissions?'

'Faked.'

Everyone turned to face Alexander Christian.

The Brigadier leant forward to explain. 'We have had the ability to fake space-to-surface transmissions since my day. A military satellite, designation Haw-Haw, was put up by the Black Star rocket in 1971. It was capable of jamming extraterrestrial signals and broadcasting messages that looked like they came from deep space.'

'Who controls this satellite?'

'It always used to be the Space Security boys.' Alexander Christian informed the room. Bambera nodded, jotting down a note.

The young UNIT Captain straightened. 'With respect, sir, can we prove these transmissions are faked?'

Bambera scowled. 'We can try. It should be straightforward enough to match voice patterns and so on. See to it when we've finished here, Captain Ford.'

The Doctor was holding his hand up, like a schoolboy in a classroom. 'Brigadier,' he interrupted, 'there must be a genuine signal, too. Try retuning to find the real telemetry from the Orbiter - it shouldn't be too difficult to find.'

Bambera nodded.

Captain Ford was objecting again. 'Ma'am, even if the transmissions are fakes, it doesn't prove we're dealing with aliens. There aren't any records of Martians in the UNIT archive.'

'We've never faced them before,' Lethbridge-Stewart informed him.

'The Doctor and I certainly have,' Summerfield interrupted. It was the first time she had spoken unless she had been answering a question put to her, and she was aware of the sceptical looks around the room, unsure whether to continue.

The Doctor had his feet on the desk, his hands were folded behind his head. 'Bernice is from the twenty-sixth century,' he explained, delighting in the astonished expressions this revelation earned him. 'By then, the human race has colonised Mars and displaced the native Martian population. Bernice is an expert on Martian civilisation and culture. With the greatest respect, time is pressing.'

A couple of people at the table looked bemused by the revelations, but they'd seen enough in their time with UNIT

to at least keep an open mind. They took their lead from Bambera, who was taking al the information in her stride.

'Doctor, I'll need some sort of proof of Martian involvement before I can even think of asking to deploy UNIT

forces. And I need some evidence - anything - that points to a wider conspiracy. I'm afraid the MoD wil not believe the words of an escaped psycho. No offence, Colonel Christian.'

'None taken, Brig,' Alexander said lightly.

The Doctor was staring at the television screens, and knowing him, Lethbridge-Stewart imagined that he was taking in every piece of information, trying to find a clue in there. 'At the moment,' the Doctor blurted, 'because of the manned mission, almost every telescope in the country is pointing at Mars. Get them to check their records - at some point today there will have been a disturbance on the Martian surface. Check the photographs, and you'l see it bears an uncanny resemblance to an ICBM launch or a Moon rocket.'

'Do it, Corporal,' Bambera ordered. The prim Corporal could do that from her box of tricks, too, it seemed.

Bambera stiffened. 'OK, here's the score: if the Doctor is wrong, and there aren't any Martians, no-one wil ever know. Space Centre has everything pretty well covered up, and there's no problem. But, if there are Martians, UNIT need to know about it. From this point, we'l assume for the sake of argument that the Martians are out there and that they are mad with us. So, Doctor, Professor Summerfield, what are these Martians going to do?'

'Can't we tell them it was an accident?' Ford objected. 'We didn't even know that there were any Martians, let alone what their laws are.'

Bambera fixed the Doctor with a stare. 'I take it that ignorance of the law is no defence?'

'No,' the Doctor intoned gravely.

'What's al this about forty hours?' the Brigadier asked. 'It takes four months to travel to Mars, yes?'

The Doctor shook his head sadly. 'Martian science is far in advance of that of the human race.' Lethbridge-Stewart expected the Doctor to say something of the sort.

His old friend stood up, abruptly, and began pacing the room again. He ended up at the head of the table. All eyes were on him. 'From launch on Mars to arrival here, it wil take just under forty eight hours.'

The Doctor flashed a smile, and stabbed down at the corporal's keyboard. All the pictures on the video wall snapped off. 'That was very distracting. Now, by my calculations, the Martians will be in Earth orbit by Thursday lunch time. They will declare their intentions, presumably via radio. If they are not given what they ask for, they will take it by force.'

Bambera straightened. 'And that is it?'

'Isn't it enough?' Benny asked.

'Word coming in from Skywatch Control, Brigadier. They've retuned to the new frequency.'

'Now we'll have some evidence for you, Winifred,' the Doctor shouted triumphantly.

The signal from the Orbiter was piped through the loudspeakers again. This time there weren't any voices, just the steady bleeping of the computers on Earth and Mars talking to each other.

'There's no sign of the telemetry from the Lander, ma'am.'

'The Lander has been destroyed along with its crew,' the Doctor declared, almost casual y. 'And the war rocket has shown up on the photographs, hasn't it?'

The Corporal tapped a control and the video wal filled with astronomical pictures, images of Mars.

The prim young woman checked her own screen. 'Our watchers report that the Orbiter is still there, and there's been no sign of a spaceship launch from the Martian surface. We have triple confirmation of that.'

The Doctor's face fell. 'Well,' he said, a note of uncertainty in his voice, 'keep looking, won't you?'

***

Eve was surrounded by her silk dress, the leather sofa, his wool suit. The smell of the whisky and the leather and his aftershave. Lord Greyhaven - Edward - had none of a young man's urgency, and was content to hold her and kiss her face and mouth, if that was all that she wanted. She straightened a leg, and together he half-pushed, she half-pulled down until she was laid the full length of the sofa, her head on the armrest. Her hand on the back of his neck, his skin rougher than anyone's she had known before. His weight on her, pushing her further down into the cushions. The smell of coffee.

She opened her eyes and there was a tray full of coffee pots and cups on the glass table. His secretary had come in with them and left without making a sound. Eve shifted up onto one elbow, about to say something.

Greyhaven eased himself back, until he was upright. He placed a hand on her side, just beneath her ribcage.

'I have something for you,' he said very seriously. He leant over her to get to the tray.

'Coffee?' she asked, laughing.

'That too. If you'l excuse me, I just have one little thing to do.'

She moved her legs, allowing him to stand. He crossed the room, closing the door behind him. After a moment, she could hear his voice drifting across from his office. One side of a conversation.

Eve looked around guiltily, as though she was being watched. Then she made a decision to listen in. She tiptoed across the room. 'We have crossed the Rubicon.' Edward informed someone that she couldn't see.

Eve eased the door open and peeked through the crack. Edward was alone.

'Understood. But how?' It was a man's voice, and she recognised it. Edward was addressing a hands free telephone, or intercom. There was a speaker on the desk that hadn't been there before. It came as a relief that Greyhaven wasn't talking to himself.

'I pride myself on my resourcefulness. You wil see.' Eve edged back behind the door, aware that this was a private conversation.

'If you are sure, then I am sure, Teddy.' The line clicked, dead.

Edward had picked up a small brass box from his desk, squeezing its side. A faint warbling sound started up.

Greyhaven slipped the box into his jacket pocket and pressed something on his desk. A panel slid back into place, concealing the intercom he'd been talking to. Greyhaven gathered up another little box from the desk and then straightened, heading back her way.

Eve dashed back to the sofa, and had arranged herself on it as he opened the door. Edward was carrying a long, thin box, which he passed over to her as he sat down. The sort of box jewellery came in. Eve pulled herself up, a little clumsily. Inside was a gold necklace.

'Not too ostentatious, I hope.' He passed it over.

'It's beautiful.' It was understated, elegant and worth a small fortune. 'When-?'

'Adelle, my secretary chose it for me this afternoon. She has more taste in that area. Try it on.'

Eve lifted her hair, letting him wrap it around her. It was heavier than she had expected. When he had finished, he withdrew, looking a little

uncomfortable.

'It's so expensive.'

'I'd much rather spend my money on my friends than on my carpet.'

She leant over him, kissing him on the forehead, then the bridge of his nose. He shifted, allowing her closer.

***

Half a world away, the Prime Minister checked his tie in the mirror.

This was going to be a big speech. There had been a lot of uncertainty for the last couple of years. But with the British and American elections out of the way, things were going to settle down for a while. This speech would set the tone for Anglo-American relations, and he wanted to grab the imagination with it, not just say the same old things about 'special relationships'.

The Prime Minister always got nervous before a speech, whether he was addressing the United Nations or the Women's Institute, and it had become a habit to come to the washroom, splash his face with water and check his appearance. The wash basins in the White House were relatively lavish affairs: large and spotlessly clean.

The washroom door swung noisily open. It was his bodyguard.

'Is everything all right?' the Prime Minister asked, reaching for the hand towel.

The bodyguard shot him twice, once in the chest and once in the back of the head.

***

Alarms were sounding around the UNIT Offices. Bambera's phone rang. The Doctor watched silently as she picked it up and listened for a couple of seconds before replacing the receiver.

'Corporal, patch through the datafeed from Skywatch One.'

That was the radar station in Essex that kept its dish pointing upwards. Twenty years ago it had been able to detect an artificial object a million miles away. Who knows what its range was now?

A roughly cylindrical object was in plain view, and no more than

200,000 miles away. It was moving fast across the screen.

The Doctor leapt to his feet. 'We're too late!' he gasped.

'It is now on a direct heading for Earth,' the Corporal announced.

The Doctor stared straight at Bambera, pointing at the screen. 'Your people want proof? *That* is pretty compelling evidence, I would say.'

Lethbridge-Stewart turned to face his old friend. 'Doctor, you said that we had two days.'

The Doctor grabbed a handful of his hair and stared at the screen. 'Martian spacedrives are notoriously slow. I don't understand how they have got here so quickly.'

Alexander Christian rubbed his chin. 'It's simple old chap. The radar signal was jammed. It's been on its way here all this time and no-one down here was any the wiser.'

The Doctor pressed his face up to the video wall, calculating trajectories and velocities. 'Yes, of course. Don't you see, Brigadier? It means that this has been planned: the Martians launched their revenge ship a day and a half *before* the astronauts even set foot on Mars.'

'Skywatch confirms UFO on heading for Northern hemisphere.'

'But how did the Martians know that the Lander was heading their way?'

'They must have picked up the transmissions from Mars 97,' Bernice suggested.

The Doctor whirled to face the video screens, a little concerned. They were al missing something obvious. A cylindrical object on radar; faked radio signals; no telemetry from the Lander. He turned back to the group.

Captain Ford's former scepticism had evaporated. He was also staring at the screen, unable to take his eyes from it. 'So how long have we got?'

The Doctor glanced up at the screen. 'Fifteen minutes, maybe twenty.'

Bambera snatched up the phone. 'We'll need a global state of emergency. Captain Ford, contact the Secretary-General and the Prime Minister. Tell them "Cromwel ". Tell them "Ultimate".'

Back in the Second World War, 'Cromwell' had been the codeword for the German invasion of Britain. An invasion that had never come. 'Ultimate' must be some sort of codeword stressing the urgency of the situation.

'The PM's in Washington. We'll need the Home Secretary.'

'Whatever,' she snapped.

'Skywatch confirms UFO on heading for Western Europe.'

'Brigadier - it's New York for you.'

'That was quick.'

The Secretary-General appeared on the screen. 'Winifred. I've just received word from Downing Street. Now you're declaring a Cromwell Ultimate. What on Earth is going on there?' She had a pleasant Irish accent.

Bambera scowled at the screen. 'Secretary-General, we have reason to believe - '

'Ten minutes ago, I had the Home Secretary on the line. He says that you've got Alexander Christian in there.'

Brigadier Bambera was a little taken aback. 'Yes we have, he - '

'They have formal y requested the suspension of UNIT operations in the United Kingdom pending an investigation.

You are not above the law, Brigadier.'

Bambera pulled herself up to her full height. 'Madam, we have a global security alert.'

'Wel that's just it. There's nothing on the radar, no anomalous radio transmissions. The sky is clear, Brigadier. In future, before you tell everyone the world's about to end, kindly check your sources. Provide me with concrete evidence and hand over Colonel Christian to the British police. Do that, and I'll reconsider. End.'

The screen went blank.

'We need to warn the public,' Bernice said quietly.

'That is the last thing we wil do,' Bambera snorted. 'Can you imagine the panic when we announce that not only do aliens exist, but they're about to attack?'

Bernice was scathing: 'Don't you think they'll be panicking anyway in a quarter of an hour when the war rocket lands and Martian battle tanks pour out?'

'Can't we at least set off air-raid sirens?' Lethbridge-Stewart suggested. 'Get as many people as we can into shelters.' The Doctor looked around. For al their brisk efficiency, for all their expertise, there was little that the people in this room could do to protect their citizens.

'The Martians won't get that far,' Bambera announced, dialling a short number. 'Missile Control?'

'Missile Control here.' The reply was relayed around the conference room.

The Doctor opened his mouth to object, but Bambera was already barking instructions into her microphone. 'We need a surface-to-space ICBM strike. Those are your co-ordinates now. Authorisation: Seabird One. Dayword: Electron.'

'Denied, UNIT HQ.'

' *Denied*?' Bambera snarled.

'Skywatch confirms UFO heading for the United Kingdom,' the Corporal cal ed out.

'Direct orders, United Nations, ma'am.' The line went dead.

The Doctor sighed with relief. 'Any attempt at violence will be met by the Martians with superior firepower.'

Captain Ford was still staring at the radar screen. 'Couldn't we contact another country? Another branch of UNIT

would have the authority. Call NUIT in Paris.'

'Sir, we can't ask the French to start firing nuclear missiles over British airspace. What if one fell short?'

'Won't other countries start taking things into their own hands and arrange their own nuclear strike?'

'They won't,' Lethbridge-Stewart said, more in hope than certain knowledge.

'Can't we try talking to them?' Bernice asked.

'Do you speak Martian. Mrs Summerfield?'

'As a matter of fact - '

'UFO is now in the atmosphere. Trajectory confirmed.' A string of numbers ran across the computer screen.

'Calculating course,' the Corporal said.

'It's heading for Trafalgar Square,' the Doctor announced. 'Brigadier, you have to get us down there.'

'UNIT engagement protocols - '

' - the Doctor knows al about them, Captain,' Lethbridge-Stewart interrupted, 'in fact he helped me to draft them.

We need a containment team down there to evacuate the public, we need military units to keep them out.'

'I am aware of what we need, Brigadier,' Bambera bawled at him, 'but I have just been given a direct order from the Secretary-General to stay put.'

'This is far more important than the petty concerns of your planet,' the Doctor yel ed.

'I agree, but - '

'Tracking computer confirms the landing area as Central London.'

The Doctor looked up at the ceiling. Far, far above him, the Martian spacecraft would be visible from the ground now.

'We're too late,' he whispered. He darted for the door. 'Come on, Bernice!'

***

Night was falling over London.

It never got dark in the city. The street lighting became diffused with

the air pollution, and the sky glowed a muddy orange. On most nights you could see the Moon, and some of the brighter stars, but nothing much else. So few people ever looked up.

A black shape appeared among the clouds, parting them like a plough. It was vast, larger than any of the buildings it passed over.

Warning buzzers had already sounded at Air Traffic Control stations around the city. Airspace had been cleared, as best it could. Police stations were beginning to get the first of their phone calls from worried citizens.

***

Alan dialled the number of the Newsdesk.

'Gloria, it's Alan in London. I know I'm too late for the evening news, but I've got a story for you. Yeah - you'll want to flash it. Check the pictures of the - '

The line was beginning to crackle. Alan scowled at the phone, unable to believe that the story of the century would slip through his fingers because of a dodgy telephone.

'The line's terrible,' he told Oswald.

'It's the government listening in. They're on to us. We'd better get moving!'

51

The young man was swinging his head from side to side, checking to see if anyone was watching the phone box.

Alan ignored him.

'Check the pictures of the Mars Landing,' he shouted into the phone. 'Look at the air lines. One's disconnected. It's the story of the century: the Mars Missions are a fake. The Brits haven't been to Mars at all. Tell the world!' He slammed the handset down, knowing that he'd just made history. Oswald was waving at him.

'Alan, look up there, for Christ's sake.'

Alan did as Oswald said, and saw a vast, dark shape coming down through the clouds over the Thames.

***

For the first couple of seconds, those that looked up and saw it thought it was an aircraft in trouble. But after a moment of panic, they realised it couldn't be. It was perfectly silent. It wasn't a zeppelin, either: the hul was clearly made from thick metal plates, riveted together, and it must have weighed many hundreds of tonnes. It was drifting down, apparently effortlessly. In reality the underside of the object was lined with tiny rocket vents which were pulsing with bursts of magnetic force.

Far below, television pictures and computer monitors began to shimmer. Car radios and phone lines began to crackle. Every audio and video tape in Central London was wiped. Cutlery drawers were rattling, every loose piece of metal across the city began jiggling up and down.

People were beginning to look up. Cars stopped, the crowds on the streets began to point up into the sky. Every burglar alarm and car alarm went off.

***

The Sumerian MechInfs had wiped out the Mongol Militia, and now they were advancing relentlessly towards the Mongol capital, Doug City. The three hundred year campaign was reaching its inevitable conclusion and only an act of God would save him now. Stil Emperor Doug fought on.

The VDU rippled, then the computer tried to reset itself. Every other machine in the Café was bleeping as they rebooted. Doug looked around at the denizens of his Internet Café, all of whom were glaring at him as though the freak electrical surge was his fault.

‘The end of Civilisation,’ he chuckled.

***

Eve Waugh often woke in an unfamiliar bed.

This was the first time she had found herself in a married man's room wearing nothing but a ten-thousand-dollar necklace. It was the first time she'd slept with a member of the House of Lords. It was the first time for a long time that she'd shared a bed with anyone. What would her mother think?

Although the curtains were drawn, she could see that it was stil only the early evening outside.

Edward had risen and dressed while she dozed. She was dimly aware of him getting out of the bed, kissing her shoulder as he left. Ten minutes ago? She could hear him outside in the living room, boiling a kettle.

Eve sat up, brushing her chest where the segments of the necklace had dug little marks into her skin. She checked her watch as she scooped it up from the bedside table. It was seven in the evening. She'd been asleep for a couple of hours. The night was still young.

Edward's bathrobe was hanging up by the bed. Eve stepped over to it. The carpet felt as worn as it looked. She toyed with the idea of putting the robe on. It smelt of his aftershave. She decided not to wear it. If it was seven, his staff had gone home, and besides they'd proved very discreet. So she walked through to where he was, wearing nothing but her new necklace and her watch.

Edward was standing at the window, looking out over the Thames. He was immaculate in his wool suit, he'd even brushed his hair and fitted the handkerchief to his jacket pocket. As she walked in, he turned to face her. She hardly saw his reaction to her.

There was a UFO coming up the Thames. She ran over to the window, pressing her palms to the glass. Five storeys up, she got a better view of the alien machine than most. It looked like... it didn't look like anything from Earth.

Eve stared up into the twilight sky and tried to fit the object into her own frame of reference. There was a resemblance to a Civil War ironclad, its prow reminded her of the head of a swordfish. It was built from a dark metal, like cast iron, but it glittered. The portholes looked like a fly's compound eyes, and it was possible to see through the smoky glass that the interior was lit in languid red, like emergency lighting. Something was shifting around in there: dark, diffracted shapes that were impossible to interpret. It was vast.

It was fol owing the course of the river, heading upstream. It barely cleared Tower Bridge and passed over HMS

Belfast on the river. It was possible to guess its size now it was coming alongside the Greyhaven Building. It eclipsed Guys Hospital and London Bridge station, so it was larger than the two combined. That made it a kilometre long, perhaps two hundred metres broad. A dozen

times bigger than a Jumbo Jet.

Edward placed a hand on her bare shoulder. 'It's heading across the city. Get dressed. We have to get to Mission Control,' he said softly.

52

Police cars were racing through London.

It was so large that it was visible right across the city. The pavements, the parks and the rooftops were full of people staring up at it, trying to work out what it was. Loudmouths were proclaiming it to be a publicity stunt for a movie, a hot air balloon, a Jeremy Beadle wind-up. No-one was listening to them.

EastEnders vanished from ten million television screens, replaced by a live feed from the roof of the BBC. The picture jumped around a bit at first: there was no commentary. There were dozens of people up there, all looking upwards at an object in the sky. Some were pointing, others were talking. There was an urgency about the image that every viewer found compel ing. They edged closer to the screen, trying to ignore their children who were asking what was going on. The object passed overhead, drifting over the Strand. They heard Nicholas Witchell's voice telling them that this was a genuine news programme, and the object on their television screen was an alien spacecraft.

But everyone could see that for themselves. This wasn't a model, a computer graphic or any other kind of special effect. It wasn't a hoax, a mass hallucination, a scare story, a dream, a practical joke, a fossilised polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbon or a science fiction drama.

It was an alien spacecraft, coming to rest ten feet above Nelson's Column.

53

C

hapter Seven

Work, Rest and Play

By eight o'clock in the evening, British Summer Time, on Tuesday, May 6th 1997, everyone in the world knew that there was an alien spacecraft hovering over London.

Back in the late sixties the United Nations had agreed what would happen if mankind encountered alien lifeforms.

The experts agreed that the "First Contact", as they called it, would be a faint radio signal from deep space. It followed that the First Contact would almost certainly be with a radio telescope facility somewhere in the world, or perhaps a military listening station. The alien radio signal might be many hundreds of years old: radio waves travel ed at the speed of light, and so even those from the nearest star would be over four years old. That meant that the human race would have time to carefully compose its response - this wouldn't be a conversation with aliens, more like an exchange of letters.

So it was agreed: the staff of the radio telescope that picked up the message would pass it on to the Secretary-General of the United Nations. A team of experts would translate the message (any aliens trying to contact us would have considered the language barrier, and would keep the message straightforward - using basic mathematical or geometric concepts, perhaps, or a series of simple pictures). This translation would then be made completely public. The world would decide what response to send, and the world would send only one reply, leaving aside all cultural, political and economic differences.

Few of the people drawing up the First Contact Protocol thought that it would work like that in practice, and when the time came it didn't. For many centuries there was some debate about exactly when "First Contact" between mankind and aliens took place. The Martian Invasion of 1997, of course, was always cited as the definitive moment, but it had become clear years before then that the major governments had positive proof of the existence of extraterrestrial life. Aliens had visited mankind for thousands of years, leaving their trails across the archaeological strata and their subtle influence on human development. Visitors from other worlds were worshipped as gods or hunted down as monsters through the centuries.

In the late twentieth century, as the human race began to venture out into space, they had reached a level of scientific understanding that allowed them to interpret the old legends and superstitions. They also now possessed a level of technology that allowed aircraft and radar to sweep the skies for unidentified flying objects. Alien spacecraft and other artefacts began to arrive on Earth with alarming regularity.

The year that the United Nations drew up the First Contact Protocols, the governments of half a dozen of its member states were already concealing the existence of aliens from their citizens and from each

other. The UN

realised that such insularity was dangerous, and that if one country were to acquire alien weapons or other technology, then this would destabilise the carefully balanced world order. During Waldheim's term as secretary-general, restricting access to alien science became just as much a priority as preventing the proliferation of nuclear technology. A policy decision was made at the very highest levels of government that the public should not be informed about any alien 'incursion', regardless of its significance.

This level of secrecy means that historians were never able to reach a consensus over when what they cal 'The Real First Contact' was made. Some stil preferred to count the Arcturan Treaty of 2085. That had been an official, peaceful contact. The first time that human and alien sat down and talked, rather than attempted to commit genocide.

The Martian Invasion was yet another demonstration of the shortcomings of the First Contact Protocols, not least because the designated Contact Group, the local UNIT contingent had just been suspended. With the Prime Minister in the United States, there was some confusion among the British authorities about who exactly was meant to initiate contact with the aliens.

The result was chaos for the first hour. A million people descended on Trafalgar Square, desperate to see the alien vessel. A million more attempted to flee the city, convinced that the world was about to come to an end. The authorities were caught in the middle as two million of their citizens stampeded.

The scheduled editions of *Wildlife at One* and *The Cook Report* had been postponed. BBC1 and ITV were both showing the same image from different angles: the prow of the UFO hanging over Nelson's Column, pointing down the Mall straight at Buckingham Palace. The main body of the vessel was hanging directly over the Strand.

Learned commentators and experts tried to find the words to match the image. They failed.

***

'What are our options, General?'

'We can do little to contain the information, Mr President. Every station has been broadcasting pictures of the object for the last half hour. The FCC are pul ing as much as it as we can, but the word is

out.'

'I'm not worried about the damn *coverage*, General, I'm worried by the alien spaceship. A nuclear strike is out the question, I know, but - '

'With respect, sir, I don't think we should be ruling out the nuclear option at this stage.'

'It's a hundred metres above London, General.'

'Sir, a pre-emptive nuclear strike might prove to be the only effective method of destroying the Hostile. I am not recommending that at this stage, but we can't rule it out.'

'Understood. What do you recommend?'

'Firstly, sir, we need to mobilise the National Guard. We need troops in al the cities, and additional forces in the air, ready to deploy them wherever there is trouble.'

'You think that the aliens are going to attack us?'

'That I don't know, sir. So far, there's no evidence either way and the situation seems contained in London. What I know is that at any moment riots are going to break out from here to Los Angeles.'

'I think you're underestimating the American people. There was a study done under the Carter administration which concluded that when confronted with indisputable evidence of alien life, most people's reaction would be one of awe and quiet contemplation.'

'That report was wrong. Mr President, our system of government operates on a very simple principle: the people trust the authorities to keep them safe. They can wake up every morning, believe what they read in their newspapers, take the kids to school, drive to work, earn some money that they can spend how they want, go to the park without being bombed, eat their lunch without being poisoned. They pay us taxes, we keep them safe. Now, what we have there on CNN, in glorious colour and NICAM stereo sound, is proof that we can't protect them. We don't know what it is, what it can or wil do, who's in there, where they even came from. Mr President, our people aren't safe anymore. When they realise that, a lot of them will get angry, a lot of them wil get frustrated. Some of them wil take to the streets.'

The President rubbed his chin. 'Mobilise the guard.'

***

They'd been forced to abandon Bessie halfway up Whitehall, the streets were full of people and it would be quicker to get to Trafalgar Square on foot.

'This is madness!' the Doctor shouted back to Benny over the noise of the crowd. 'All these people, heading towards the Martian ship like moths to the flame.'

Benny apologised to the Rastafarian girl whose foot she'd just stood on. 'Doctor, I hate to point this out, but we're trying to get there, too.'

The Doctor turned around, continuing to walk backwards without even slowing. Unlike Benny, he wasn't having any problem slipping through the throng. 'We are doing so out of scientific interest, and because we might prove invaluable as impartial negotiators in this little dispute.'

Benny squeezed past two of the fattest men she had ever seen and came up alongside him. 'How do you propose to start the negotiations, Doctor?' she asked sweetly. 'By shouting up at them?'

'I don't think my voice would be loud enough,' the Doctor said in al seriousness.

They could see the ship properly for the first time.

It took Benny a couple of seconds to realise that the reason the hul was strobing with bright blue light was that it was being photographed by thousands of people, all using flashbulbs. She hoped that the Martians, from a planet in perpetual twilight, didn't take the bright light as some sort of attack. The flickering glare of the flashbulbs made the Martian ship appear even more nightmarish than it already was. The ship was too large to take in at one attempt: it just left impressions of a surface like that of a seashell or a snail, fins like a deep-sea fish.

Despite that, Benny recognised the basic design of the spacecraft - Martian rockets had remained unchanged for a hundred thousand years. The Martians had followed the pattern of technological development familiar on ten thousand worlds throughout the galaxy, and they had evolved many millennia before the human race. The Martian Industrial Revolution had taken place at the same time as the

Pliocene on Earth. On her expedition, Benny had discovered the remains of documents a mil ion years old that were evidence of Martian space travel.

The Martians, the Ice Warriors as the Doctor insisted on calling them, would have conquered the solar system, even the galaxy, but for the lack of resources on their home world. Energy sources were scarce, few of the necessary metals were present in sufficient quantities. Martian astronomers knew that both the Earth and the asteroid belt were abundant with mineral wealth, but other planets remained tantalisingly just out of reach.

One of her contemporaries had suggested that another reason why the Martians never developed their space travel was that their military culture was never geared to rocketry. The Martians lived in nests and cities deep underground, and such dwellings were scarce and impossible to attack from the air. Wars were fought to *capture* such possessions and territory, not to destroy them. The Martians favoured sonic guns and germ warfare, not

'dishonourable' bombs that destroyed civilian populations and turned whole cities into radioactive craters.

'Why aren't the Martians doing anything?' Benny asked.

'The same reason that there was a delay when the human astronauts landed on Mars,' the Doctor shouted back at her, 'the ship's crew are acclimatising to the gravity and the temperature. They are probably a little confused by their reception - they wil want to assess this crowd, try and work out whether it's an army or not.'

'What made them pick London?' Benny asked.

The Doctor slipped through a group of German tourists. 'They must have tracked the source of the radio transmissions to the Orbiter: the Martian ship took a direct course for the National Space Museum. Something of a coincidence, otherwise, isn't it?'

55

The mass of people was almost stationary now. Most of the men and women had began to realise that they weren't going to get much closer. Or they had chosen not to - the object filled the sky, and every detail on its hull was visible from this distance. Sections of the flank were covered in wicked-looking spines. People were hesitating, holding still.

So, as the crowd became denser and denser, it became easier to move through it. Benny realised that she and the Doctor were the only people really trying. Everyone else stood staring at the sky. Benny found herself following the Doctor right into the Square itself.

Benny was tal enough to see over most heads, and by the time they had reached the crowd-control barriers she had built up a picture of what was happening. The police were clearing groups of people from around the Column itself. They'd also cleared the Strand, and a steady line of emergency vehicles was streaming up the long road.

Benny wondered idly what the Martians made of the convoy of large vehicles swarming beneath them with flashing lights and wailing sirens. The TARDIS was still sitting in the middle of the Square where they'd left it. Its technology was way beyond that of the Martians, so there was little chance they could detect its true nature.

The Doctor was pointing past it. 'Over there, Bernice. The army.'

A couple of army vehicles were also there: large trucks, personnel carriers, nothing like a tank or even an armoured car.

'Excel ent,' he enthused. 'They're thinking. They are trying not to antagonise the aliens. The helicopters are keeping their distance, too.'

Benny cocked her head. Over the burbling of the crowd, the wailing of the sirens and the ever-present noise of the traffic in the distance, she could hear helicopter rotor blades.

'Good, good.' The Doctor whirled around, scanning the rooftops.

Bernice looked up. The Martian ship blocked out a quarter of the sky, its stern almost, but not quite, disappearing over the horizon. ' *This* is good?'

'Well, the Martians have been here half an hour and they haven't wiped us out yet - that's got to be a promising sign.'

'The big ship-mounted Martian sonic cannons take thirty-five minutes to power up.'

The Doctor looked up at the ship and then back down to her. 'Really?'

She nodded, biting her lip. They were right up against the crash barriers now. The chains securing them together were rattling.

The Doctor bent down to examine the phenomenon. 'Magnetic repulsion. Fascinating - a side effect of the magnetic flux that keep that ship afloat, no doubt.' He held the nearest padlock still and unfastened it with the sonic screwdriver and ushered Benny through the new gap. Al this was achieved without drawing any attention from either members of the crowd or the nearest policemen.

Before she had time to worry about that, they were heading across the Square. Like the crowd, the policemen and soldiers were al looking up at the ship. Here, they were directly underneath it, watching the winking lights at various points along the hull.

One group of policemen was standing right in front of the TARDIS door. Even if the Doctor had wanted to get inside he couldn't. It wasn't on the agenda, anyway, in fact the Doctor seemed unaware of the presence of his time machine.

'That's Eve, isn't it?' he asked. Benny followed his line of vision.

***

Lord Greyhaven's Aston Martin drew up just outside the Scotland Yard mobile command centre. A police officer opened the door for him, a young Army lieutenant for his passenger.

Staines was there already, waiting for him.

'What is it, Teddy?' he asked, glancing upwards.

Greyhaven raised a finger to his lips. 'Have you met Miss Evelin Waugh?'

She was young and blonde, and wearing a clinging silk dress. He remembered her from before at the Space Museum. Most of the men there would remember her. 'You're a lot prettier than your namesake,' the Home Secretary giggled.

'Gee, thanks,' she replied. She had an American accent.

'Miss Waugh is a journalist,' Greyhaven said, the merest hint of a warning in his tone of voice.

'Oh, the place is crawling with those,' the Home Secretary joked. 'There's a Yankee cameramen over there.' He gestured vaguely towards the outside broadcast vans that were massing by the National Portrait Gallery.

The woman looked up at Lord Greyhaven. 'Brilliant: that's Alan, my cameraman. Edward, I've got work to do: I'l see you later,' she told Greyhaven quietly, brushing against him as she hurried away.

'I say, Teddy, have you and she... ?'

Lord Greyhaven was staring up at the vast bel y of the spacecraft. 'Is that real y the most pressing question on your mind, Staines?'

'I asked you what that was before, and you didn't tell me.'

Greyhaven glanced up, nonchalantly. 'That is a Martian spacecraft.'

'However do you know?'

Lord Greyhaven looked at him witheringly.

Staines rounded on him. 'This wasn't the plan, Teddy. The Martians were just meant to send back the plans for the equipment in the Mars 97. They weren't meant to kill the astronauts in the Orbiter, they certainly weren't meant to come here in person.'

'Why wait four months? And why settle for blueprints? I agreed that it would be easier all round if they brought samples of their technology themselves. They can provide moral support for our little venture. Don't you want to meet our friends from Mars? Besides,' he chuckled, 'they didn't kill the crew of the Orbiter, that was a terrible accident.'

It took the Home Secretary a few moments to decipher Greyhaven's sarcastic tone. ' *You* opened the airlocks?'

Staines asked, with a mixture of anger and incredulity. 'From here, by remote control?'

He remembered Greyhaven leaning over an instrument panel at Mission Control, to shake a man's hand. Had he brushed against one of the controls then?

Lord Greyhaven chuckled. 'My dear chap, what sort of a fellow do you take me for?'

Staines straightened. 'But why?'

'They would have died soon anyway. This was the most humane way.' Staines imagined the astronauts in space, trying to breathe frozen

nothing, millions of miles from the nearest human beings. 'But I read that people explode in space. The vacuum.'

'Nonsense,' Greyhaven said dismissively. 'Staines, it needed to be done. We need the Orbiter there. Think of it as our insurance policy. Better still, don't think about it at al .'

Greyhaven checked his watch and looked up.

***

There was a bellowing noise from the Martian craft, which squealed around Trafalgar Square, bouncing of the buildings, making everyone jump. There was absolute silence, absolute stil ness. After a couple of moments, nothing else had happened and the relief from the crowd was audible. A couple of groups began laughing.

Then the message started. It echoed down from the ship, from a public address system, and on a number of radio frequencies:

'WARRIORS UNDER THE BANNER OF THE UNITED KINGDOM HAVE VIOLATED THE TOMB OF OUR

GREAT MARSHALL KYRUUL OF THE ARGYRE CLAN, UNDER THE SACRED SANDS OF THE MARE

SIRENUM. THESE CRIMINALS ATTEMPTED TO STEAL THE TREASURES WITHIN. THEIR SHAMEFUL ACT

IS ONE FOR WHICH THE WHOLE CLAN MUST BE PUNISHED. IN ACCORDANCE WITH OUR LAW, ALL

TERRITORIES, MINERAL RIGHTS AND THE SOVEREIGNTY OF THE CLANS OF THE UNITED KINGDOM

ARE NOW FORFEIT. THE UNITED KINGDOM IS NOW UNDER THE RULE OF THE HEAD OF THE ARGYRE

CLAN, THE LORD XZNAAL, AND ALL ITS CITIZENS ARE SUBJECT TO MARTIAN FEUDAL LAW. YOU HAVE

ONE HOUR TO AGREE TO THESE TERMS. AT THAT TIME, YOUR LEADER SHALL COME HERE IN PERSON

AND SUBMIT TO OUR REGENCY.'

There was silence.

The Doctor squinted up, something on his mind. The crowd was getting louder.

'The voice... ' he said.

It hadn't been the usual Martian grunt, it had been beautiful y modulated, a little quiet, perhaps, the hint of a lisp, but it sounded almost human. 'That's because the speaker was in his native atmosphere,' Benny explained. 'He wasn't gasping for carbon dioxide.'

The Doctor turned back to her, his mouth open. 'I know that,' he said, almost scathingly, 'what I want to know is where he learnt English. Specifically the human names for Martian geographical features on Mars.'

'Good point.' Benny looked over at him. This Doctor could rush in where angels fear to tread, he could drop everything at a moment's notice without a plan or a scheme or a hint of a master plan, but that didn't make him a fool. 'Could they have monitored human radio transmissions?'

The Doctor was staring up at the ship again. 'That's probably it.' The question no longer interested him.

'Are you looking for a way in?' she asked. The Martian ship was two hundred feet above them, its hul was five-metre thick alloy, there was a gun port every ten metres behind which a sonic cannon was powering up. But the Doctor could get in anywhere if he wanted to.

'No,' the Doctor stated.

Benny's face fell. 'No?'

He turned to her and grinned, showing all those teeth. 'Why look for something you've already found?'

***

The emergency meeting of the United Nations Security Council sat back and listened to a replay of the Martian declaration. One of the members was a great deal more agitated than the others.

'Surely we must seek clarification?'

The French delegate leant forward and began speaking. The translations took a moment to catch up. 'The message is clear,

Ambassador Campbell. The Martians' only dispute is with "the clans of the United Kingdom".'

There was a babble of discussion around the huge crescent-shaped table.

'Does this mean that the Martians are not threatening the human race, only Great Britain?' one asked.

'It would certainly seem so,' another agreed.

The British ambassador straightened. 'Am I to understand that you are considering this a domestic United Kingdom matter?,' he asked incredulously. 'Are you seriously suggesting that these creatures will stop at targeting my country, and that yours wil al be safe?'

'That would certainly seem to be a conclusion that we can draw from the Martian declaration.'

'We have no intention of the whole world being dragged into an interplanetary war.'

'Do you think that the Martians can distinguish between the British and the rest of humanity?'

'You mean they might attack us through ignorance?'

'Or they might think that we are all part of the United Kingdom.'

There was further murmuring around the table.

After twenty minutes of debate, the United Nations agreed to broadcast a request for clarification. They used the radio frequency that the Martians had. The Martian response was almost immediate:

'OUR ONLY DISPUTE IS WITH THE CLANS OF THE UNITED KINGDOM. WE HOPE TO LIVE IN PEACE WITH

ALL THE OTHER RACES OF THE EARTH. HOWEVER, SHOULD OTHER HUMAN CLANS ATTEMPT TO

ATTACK MARTIAN TERRITORY OR INTERFERE WITH THE INTERNAL AFFAIRS OF THE MARTIAN

DEPENDENCIES, THEN THIS WILL BE TREATED AS AN ACT OF WAR

AND WE WILL RESPOND IN THE

APPROPRIATE MANNER.'

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The television commentators and their pundits weren't sure what to make of the announcement. The relief of those outside the British Isles was tangible, and the message of peace was taken as a very encouraging sign. The crowd in Trafalgar Square were more ambivalent. Over the objections of the British contingent, the European Parliament issued a statement welcoming the Martians, and stressing that the EU had no hostile intentions towards 'our Martian neighbours'.

The President of the United States found himself outnumbered by people advising him to appease the Martians.

Many countries issued statements that renounced violence as a general principle, and hoped that the Martians would not resort to it. Most didn't make any statement at all, hoping not to draw attention to themselves. Across the world, harassed politicians appeared on television screens, declaring that their own countries were not under immediate threat, but that all was being done to defend their borders if the Martians did attack.

Throughout the world, military leave was cancelled, bases were put on full alert and units were mobilised.

Tensions mounted, and the areas prone to rioting did indeed riot. Television commentators from Utah to the Ukraine assured their viewers that there appeared to be one Martian ship and it was staying firmly in London.

Within the hour, the tone had changed to one of wounded pride: why hadn't the Martians chosen to come to Paris, New York or Moscow?

***

Brigadier Bambera had spent the last three-quarters of an hour on the telephone, cal ing up as many senior military men as she could. Most seemed to know that UNIT's activities were official y suspended, but in the light of recent events, they were talking to her anyway.

The Martian ship hovered on the video screens, each showing a different TV channel, each showing a slightly different angle of the

vast spacecraft. Al but one channel showed the ship itself: ITN had resorted to 'artist's impressions' of the aliens.

While the eyes of the media were on the enemy, the Army were dusting off their invasion plans. There was a lot of dust on them. it was over fifty years since there had been any realistic possibility that a foreign power would invade Britain rather than obliterate it with nukes. During al that time, the British Army had kept itself busy with minor skirmishes, training exercises, Northern Ireland and peacekeeping for the UN. The theorists and strategists had spent a lot of their time running war games, planning what they would do in the unlikely event of an invasion of British soil. The computer simulations had proved that the war time plans had been broadly along the right lines.

It was a simple idea, borrowed from the terrorists, guerril as and mercenaries that the Army had spent its time fighting. Elite soldiers would, as the sexist phrase had it, 'kiss their wives and disappear', heading underground to carefully prepared safe houses and secret hideouts. Caches of weapons and other equipment were buried around the country. These soldiers would continue the fight behind enemy lines, helped by careful y-vetted locals with good knowledge of the terrain of their area. Each group would operate like a terrorist cell, to prevent infiltration.

These 'Auxiliary Units' would sabotage bridges and railway lines, monitor enemy troop movements, blow up strategic targets.

All around the country, men were kissing their wives goodbye and disappearing.

Captain Ford was on his way to UNIT HQ in Windmill One-Nine. Because of their unique position, the staff at UNIT

HQ would liaise with other countries, provide an 'underground railway' for men and materials. Ford would remove the communications equipment from HQ and take it to the rendezvous point outside Windsor.

Bambera's husband Ancelyn had been in Durham, on a pilgrimage to the tomb of St Cuthbert. Now he was heading to Balmoral with an SAS team to evacuate the Queen and Prince Phillip. The submarine *Prometheus* was waiting to take them to safety. The Prince of Wales and his sons had been on the royal jet when the Martian ship entered the atmosphere. Instead of London, the jet had ended up in Madrid.

Other members of the royal family were also being accounted for. Ancelyn would be going with the Queen to Canada, protecting the rightful sovereign and the descendants of the rightful sovereign as his sacred oath demanded.

Bambera would never get the chance to kiss her husband goodbye. She put the phone down.

'We are with you,' Lethbridge-Stewart said. Alexander Christian nodded his consent.

'With respect, gentlemen, no. Go home to your family, Alistair. We'll manage.' Bambera couldn't look them in the eye as she said it.

'No.' Lethbridge-Stewart said firmly. 'This is our fight, too.'

She smiled. 'Good.'

The Foreign Office was being deluged by messages from around the world, al of which welcomed the Martian's peaceful intentions towards the rest of the world. The Cubans were the first to welcome the new administration and hope for future co-operation. Emergency sessions in parliaments, congresses and palaces around the world concluded that a 'wait and see' policy would be most prudent.

***

Greyhaven consulted his watch.

'A quarter past eight. It is time.'

'Time?'

'With the Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary in Washington and the Chancel or of the Exchequer in bed with a nasty bout of food poisoning, you're in charge, Staines.'

'M-me?'

Greyhaven nodded. 'And the Martians did say that they wanted the leader to go up in person.'

'Er... Teddy.'

'I'll accompany you if you wish, Home Secretary.'

'You're going up there?' It was Veronica Hal iwel , the head of MI5.

'There's little choice, is there, Director General?'

'Will you be armed?' she had done her homework. Greyhaven had done his National Service, and still practised his marksmanship from time to time.

'No, thank you, commander. That's a big ship, and one handgun won't make too much difference in the lions' den, will it?'

She nodded. 'As you wish.'

'Have you raided the UNIT Offices yet?' the Home Secretary demanded.

'Sir, we need everyone at our disposal here. Besides, it's complicated. UNIT facilities have special status, we can't just wade in.'

'Director General, they have Alexander Christian in there. They are harbouring a multiple-murderer. Criminal acts don't get much more clear-cut than that. Now, I want you to raid their office, and I want you to do it now.'

'Sir!' a young soldier was running over with a radiophone. 'It's Washington, Home Secretary.'

Greyhaven leant over the soldier and unplugged the telephone's battery. 'Oops, we seem to be having technical difficulties. It must be interference from the Martian ship. Are you coming, Staines?'

'Yes, I suppose so.'

Greyhaven walked over to his car, and unlocked the boot. He pul ed out an Adidas sports bag.

'Are you going to challenge them to a game of squash?' Halliwel asked witheringly.

Greyhaven didn't reply.

'Get Christian,' Staines ordered her sternly, before he followed Greyhaven across.

***

'What's going on?' Benny asked.

A hatch was dilating open on the underside of the craft. The light inside wasn't that bright, but it stood in stark contrast to the gloomy metalwork of the rest of the ship. The crowd were getting agitated, perhaps thinking that it was a weapon of some kind. A black disc appeared in the hatchway, and it began descending in a perfectly straight line.

The Doctor stared up. 'They are sending down a platform. A lift car, I would imagine.' He checked his pocket watch. 'Dead on time. The message said that they wanted the British leader to surrender in person.' The crowd were pointing and muttering.

Benny was looking down at the ground. 'I don't see the Queen or Mr - Hang on, that's the Home Secretary. And that rocket man, er... '

'Lord Edward Greyhaven,' the Doctor supplied.

'Who died and made him boss?'

The Doctor considered Bernice's question for a moment, before he remembered that it was a figure of speech.

'This is no time for flippancy, Bernice,' he chided her.

The disc had reached the ground. Lord Greyhaven and the Home Secretary walked over and stepped onto it.

Before they had stopped moving, the disc was rising steadily into the air. There were appreciative gasps from the crowd.

The floor closed underneath them, like the iris behind a camera lens, shutting off the dizzying aerial view of Central London. Greyhaven and Staines stepped down from the magnetic disc.

59

The chamber they were in was quite pleasant, bland almost. It was large. The high ceiling was the first thing that Staines noted. That and the lighting, which was a sort of diffuse pink. The room reminded the Home Secretary of the Commons Chamber. It was about the same size, and great swathes of a green tarpaulin-like material lay neatly folded along the walls. The colour was almost the same shade as the benches that lined the Commons.

'This isn't too bad, is it?' He called over to Greyhaven nervously. Teddy's attention was fixed on the only door.

Slowly he began walking towards it, that sports bag of his in his hand. Staines followed. Around them the air was filled with the whirring of mechanisms, the rattling of pipes. The door was almost the size of a garage door, and it was made from frosted glass.

A deathly red light was glowing on the other side, almost like firelight at the end of the evening, when only the embers remained.

Something shifted behind the glass, a great, square shape moving slowly through the gloom. A machine of some kind, he thought. It was impossible to see it clearly.

'Do they know we are here, do you think?' Staines felt nervous again.

The door retracted.

Standing framed in the doorway, bathed in red light, was the worst thing that Staines had ever seen.

It looked like a barnacle encrusted deep-sea creature, a monster from the depths. It hissed, struggling for breath as it dragged itself forwards out from a bank of mist.

It was well over seven feet high and was as broad as Staines was tall, with vast shoulders, like an American footballer or a medieval knight. It was a hunchback, with a mass of thick plating piled up onto its shoulder blades.

It was skin, though, not armour. Crocodile skin, with ridges and bumps al over it. The torso and stomach were covered in a curved carapace like a tortoise's or turtle's.

It moved towards them, lumbering on legs as thick as a human torso and bulky, flipper-like feet. Wiry green-black hair sprouted from the gaps in the armour-plating - tufts of thick fur at the ankles, the elbows and the shoulders.

Its head was bigger than a motorcycle helmet, was roughly the same shape, and looked like it had been carved from a block of stone. Its eyes were red, the colour of burning coals, but they were concealed far behind two plates of thick, protective glass, like semi-visors. Staines peered up at the face, unsure whether what he was looking at was the creature's head or some kind of space-helmet. There was a gap in the faceplate below the eyes, and through it, softer, gnarled skin was just visible. This parted, revealing two rows of fangs packed together between thin lips. A red tongue, forked like a snake, flickered

over the front teeth.

Staines screamed.

60

C

hapter Eight

Death and Diplomacy

'Ssilence that creature,' the monster hissed, raising a claw like a giant crab's. The voice filled the room.

'Be quiet, Home Secretary,' Greyhaven ordered. Staines clamped his mouth shut, although whimpering noises continued to escape.

Greyhaven tried to ignore his colleague and turned to the monster. 'Lord Xznaal, I presume?'

'Lord Geryahavunn,' it whispered. The Martian looked down at Staines. Although this monster was incapable of facial expression, or even of moving its head, somehow it managed to communicate its disdain. 'Thiss iss the leader of the United Kingdom clan?' it barked.

Greyhaven looked down apologetical y at Staines, who was cowering behind him. 'Upon your arrival, the clan leaders fled their lands. They left behind this fellow. He is a good man, but he is surprised and frightened by your appearance.'

'You are not?' it grunted.

Greyhaven looked the monster up and down. 'I admit that you are not how I pictured you. Your voice has also changed - the effects of the Earth atmosphere you have provided for us in here?'

'That iss correct.' It paused to draw breath. 'How did you "picture uss"?'

Greyhaven laughed. 'As a powerfully-built member of my own race,' he admitted.

'Likewisse,' the monster chortled, lifting its head back to bark a laugh. 'We have only ever sseen your people in their sspace-armour.'

'Y-you know this creature?' Staines asked.

'Show some respect, Home Secretary. This is Lord Xznaal, leader of the Argyre Clan. He controls territory the size of Arizona.'

'Larger, now,' Xznaal reminded them.

'Indeed.' Greyhaven conceded. 'Which reminds me.' He bent down and unzipped his bag.

'Are you concealing a weapon?'

'Yes,' Greyhaven said simply.

The Martian lurched at him with surprising speed, batting him out of the way. It probed the inside of the bag with a claw, lifting out what it found. Xznaal held it between powerful pincers, examining it. 'A mace?' it asked.

'The mace!' Staines exclaimed.

Xznaal swiped the air with it experimentally. 'It iss consstructed from a ssoft metal. It would disstort when ussed in combat.'

'That is not the point ... my Lord,' Staines explained. 'That is the symbol of parliamentary power in this country.'

'A ssacred object?'

'Near enough, yes,' Greyhaven said smugly.

Staines walked over to his colleague. 'Where the hell did you get it?'

'The House of Commons, Staines, naturally. You should have asked me how I got it. 'Greyhaven turned to Xznaal.

'Possession of this gives you at least some claim to political power. We will have to examine the full constitutional position.'

Staines grabbed Greyhaven's shoulder. 'What is happening here?'

Greyhaven shook him off. 'A coup d'etat,' he explained. 'With the support and assistance of a foreign power.'

Xznaal bent over Staines. 'Thiss human iss unaware of the plan?'

Greyhaven shrugged. 'The Home Secretary here knows that my followers have been plotting a coup, using Martian technology. He did not expect the creators of that technology to turn up in person. In fact,

he thinks that your race is extinct.'

'Now might be a good time to tel me.'

'Very well,' Greyhaven said,'Over twenty years ago, the crew of Mars Probe 13 encountered Xznaal's people, the native race of Mars. Alexander Christian and his crew infiltrated a subterranean city, and were caught spying in a scientific research facility. Christian was the only one to escape. As you know, I was Minister of Science at the time, with responsibility for both the Mars programme and Space Security, and so it fell to me to sort out a potential diplomatic disaster. Once the language barrier was overcome, the Martians demanded two things: Christian's extradition, and an assurance that we would stay away from their territory. The extradition proved a logistical problem - the Prison Service would have blown their budget for the next hundred and twenty years transferring Christian sixty million miles. Eventually Xznaal agreed that we could keep him imprisoned here, but that we mustn't ever release or debrief him. We have stuck to our agreement.'

Xznaal grunted his approval. 'If a Martian had been caught at Aldermasston or Ssel afield, would you have been sso lenient?'

'Almost certainly not,' Staines admitted quickly. 'And now the Martians are angry at us because the Mars 97 breaks the other side of the agreement? But Teddy, you were the driving force behind Mars 97.'

Greyhaven and Xznaal shared a laugh.

'My dear chap, why do you think that we haven't been to Mars for over twenty years?'

'Lack of funding? The money could always be spent better elsewhere.'

'Nonsense. Think about the prestige of being the first country to put a man on Mars. Think about al the mineral wealth in the asteroid belts, think about the possibilities of a military base on the Moon, or a steel works in zero-gravity. There are energy sources and minerals in this solar system that would provide the solution to al mankind's problems; the population boom wouldn't be a problem if we could move people to Mars or Venus. Would a few billion pounds really be better spent on social security for a couple of million layabouts on one small island?'

'Mars is uninhabitable, Teddy. It doesn't have an atmosphere, it's highly radioactive.'

Greyhaven laughed. 'If Mars is uninhabitable, Home Secretary, what, precisely, do you think that is?'

'Things might live there,' Staines blurted,'but not humans.'

'Congratulations, David, that is precisely what I want people to believe. Before the mid-seventies, most scientists thought that Mars might be capable of supporting life. The Mariner probes didn't rule it out. Why do you think Britain wanted to go to Mars back in the seventies? Because it was the only planet in the solar system, other than Earth, that might be fit for colonisation. Now, I agreed with Xznaal that no Earthman would land on Mars, and it wasn't too difficult to wind down the British Mars Programme - the death of Alexander Christian's crew made it a great deal easier. But the last thing I wanted was some American or Russian mission there. I may have some clout in this country, Teddy, but I have very little influence on NASA policy. So the British Space Centre reported back that Mars was uninhabitable, we released reams and reams of scientific "evidence" proving that Mars wouldn't support a human colony, that there was far too much carbon dioxide in the atmosphere. Almost straight away, without question, the international scientific community accepted our version of events. Only the Americans weren't sure - until one of MI6's double-O agents went to Cape Canaveral and substituted the real data collected by Viking with our fake. Their plans for Mars missions have been more half-hearted since then, much easier to sabotage. The best they've come up with in twenty years is a fossil that might be from Mars. Even if it is, do you know what they thought the fossil was? The waste products of single-cell creatures. Three billion year old bacteria pooh that may or may not be from Mars.'

'But ...'

'Be quiet, Staines. You want to know the truth, then here it is: For twenty years, elements of the British security services have been active throughout the rest of the world covering up one vital fact about Mars: you or I could walk on the Martian surface without the aid of a spacesuit. Yes, it's normal y as cold as a Scottish winter, and the air is thin, but any reasonably fit man with a pair of gloves and a wool y hat could live there. '

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The crowd were beginning to disperse. Necks were getting cricked, it was getting late and the UFO was just hanging there doing nothing. The police had sealed off the area, so no-one else was getting in. There were still many hundreds of thousands of people in and around Trafalgar Square, but the crowd was appreciatively thinner than it had been. Those that remained where quiet again, expectant. Someone was proclaiming that Jesus was the one true saviour, another that the end of the world was nigh, another that he was selling soft drinks.

Everyone else stood or sat, listening to the radio, looking up at the spacecraft or down at the police and military presence. The Evening Standard had published a late edition, with ten pages of eye-witness reports and photographs. Virtually everyone in the crowd had bought a copy, hoping that it would explain what was going on.

It didn't, of course.

***

The Doctor was staring up, his eyes screwed up. He was holding the sonic screwdriver out in front of him.

'Now what are you doing?' Benny asked, tucking her newspaper underneath her arm. None of the policemen or soldiers had seen them yet, but surely it was only a matter of time.

'Knocking,' the Doctor said quietly.

***

A series of grunts and barks filled the reception chamber of the Martian ship, making Staines jump. Greyhaven's was a more measured response.

The voice swirled around them. It was the same 'holographic sound' technology that the Martians had used to communicate with Greyhaven for twenty years. Alexander Christian had brought trinkets back with him - a Martian walkie-talkie and a couple of electronic keys. These were based on a form of silicon unknown on Earth, but which could be crudely duplicated. Greyhaven had built the communicator in his office himself, and currently only that prototype existed.

The Martian leader turned to Greyhaven. 'A human in the crowd iss ussing a ssonic device. You informed uss that your race had no ssuch technology,' he spat.

'We haven't,' Greyhaven said cool y.

Xznaal hissed an order into the air.

A globe materialised in the space between them: a hologram. The image was a panning shot of the crowd, presumably from a camera mounted on the hull. Now the picture moved with more purpose, and began zooming in on a section directly below them.

62

Standing by a police box was a man and a woman. She was tall and leggy, and had adopted a tomboy look: short hair and a baggy, garish jumper. Her companion was just as striking: a man with shoulder-length hair in a full-length Victorian housecoat. They were both peering upwards at the ship. He was holding something aloft - a microphone, perhaps, or a measuring instrument of some kind.

'I know him,' Greyhaven said quietly.

'Who iss he?' Xznaal demanded.

'He was at Mission Control this morning. Do you remember, David?'

The Home Secretary shrugged. 'Yes, I think so. It was the chap that didn't know who you were.'

Greyhaven silenced him with a glare.

'I sshall desstroy them.'

'No!' Greyhaven shouted.

Xznaal hissed his displeasure.

'Xznaal, everyone on the planet is watching this spacecraft. There are a million people down there in that crowd. At the moment, they are nervous. They don't understand the benefits of co-operation with the Martians. Their reaction will be the same as Staines' - horror, terror.'

Xznaal stepped back. 'That iss how it sshould be,' he wheezed.

'If you open fire, all the human clans wil panic. My people will work with you willingly, given a little time. Better, surely, that my soldiers capture the man. That way you could question him.'

'You are a wisse counssel, Gerayhavunn. We sshall bring those humans

aboard.' He barked another order into the air.

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'A hatch is opening,' Bernice informed him.

The Doctor adjusted the settings on the sonic screwdriver. 'Can you see if there's anyone on the platform?' he asked her.

She was rubbing her neck. 'Not yet - wait a second. No, it's empty. And it's heading towards us.

The crowd were getting boisterous again.

The disc was about eight feet across, about six inches thick. Rivets ran along the underside. As it dropped below head height, the Doctor could see that the upper surface was coated with a stippled material. There were no other features, such as a control box or a communications panel,

The Doctor stepped up onto the deck, helping Bernice to do the same.

'It works on a very simple principle: there are magnetic ray projectors mounted along the hull of the ship.'

'There isn't even a handrail,' she moaned.

'More serious problems are at hand,' the Doctor informed her.

The disc began rising. Bernice was unsteady on her feet, trying to keep upright. The Doctor had no such difficulty.

'Try to stand stil ,' he advised her,'Admire the view.'

London glittered beneath them. The neo-classicism of the National Portrait gal ery looked good picked out by spotlights and street lamps. Beyond it was the London Coliseum, behind them Admiralty Arch and the imposing buildings of Whitehal .

Bernice was on her knees, looking a little green around the gil s.

'I'm not very good with heights,' she explained.

'Neither am I,' the Doctor comforted her, gazing at the Houses of Parliament about half a mile away. Westminster Abbey was sitting next to them, as ever. There were military units there, presumably ready to defend the bastions of democracy and English life if the

Martians attacked.

Bernice pulled herself back, trying to straighten up. 'It's not often you get the chance to throw up over a million people.'

'Throw up what?' the Doctor asked, distracted by Big Ben ringing half past eight. Traffic was flowing along Westminster Bridge and Piccadilly just as it would be on any other night at this time.

'Never mind. I think I'm all right, now. 'She glanced up at the spaceship. 'It looks even bigger now, doesn't it?'

'That's because it's closer,' the Doctor explained patiently.

'I know,' Bernice replied through clenched teeth. The hatchway opened above them, and the disc passed through it.

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Benny pulled herself to her feet as the hatch closed beneath them. The two politicians who had come up before them hadn't made it any further than this first reception chamber. She wondered whether they realised that the room was little more than a storage area. In the Martian scheme of things, such details of etiquette were very important, and it was probably the Lord's idea of a joke. Martian humour was occasional y elusive to humans, and most of it got lost in translation.

The Lord - Benny was still trying to remember his name from the Declaration - towered over the humans, as might be expected. The nobility of the Argyre had not adopted the sleeker bio-armour that most of the Martian clans wore by this time. That gave a couple of important clues to his character: he was a soldier, not a diplomat, he was a reactionary, he wasn't too concerned by the fashions of his people.

He was also large, taller and broader than even most of his fel ow Martians. A great crack on his shoulder blade had been crudely patched up, and the carapace had long grown back over it, leaving a dark green scar.

Unlike many of the Martian nobility, he'd been on the front line, fighting shell to shell with his men.

The Doctor was moving forward. Benny caught his arm. 'I'l do it,' she offered.

The Doctor nodded, stepping aside. 'Xznaal,' he reminded her.

Benny stepped off the disc and walked calmly up to the Martian, keeping her head bowed. 'Dass hunnur, ssli hoos-urr, Xznaal.'

'Ssperr hunnur urr tass.' The reply came automatical y, but Benny thought she detected a grudging tone in his voice. He'd also left off the honorific form. 'You know of us. 'he wheezed. It was a statement, delivered with a hint of suspicion. Benny wondered for a moment whether she'd betrayed too much knowledge.

The Doctor stepped forwards. 'Good evening, my Lord,' he glanced back at Greyhaven. 'My apologies. Good evening, my Lords. I am the Doctor, and this is my friend Bernice Summerfield. I believe that you need my help.'

'Inssolent commoner,' Xznaal hissed, straightening his claw. Nestling in the patch of green hair at his wrist was a stubby metal tube. It flowed out of the joint, like a protruding bone rather than something that had been grafted on.

It was a weapon, of course, a sonic disruptor.

The Doctor stared right down the barrel. 'You, sir, may be a Lord of Mars, but I am a Lord of Time. You wil show the respect due to me.'

'A Gallifreyan?' Xznaal whispered. He lowered his arm, and bowed his head.

The Doctor's lip curled until he was almost sneering. 'That's right. As I was saying, you need my help. Tell me everything you know.'

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The Doctor stood there, listening to them as first Xznaal, then Greyhaven recounted their versions of events. The Home Secretary, Staines, was hanging on every word as well. It didn't need an expert in body language to tel that he was terrified. Benny watched the Doctor closely. Before he had changed, he rarely referred to his home planet, and had never used it to pull rank on anyone. On the other hand, it was the perfect way to gain the respect of a Martian noblebeing.

Xznaal and Greyhaven had been in contact for over twenty years.

Throughout that time, Greyhaven had kept mankind away from Mars, and Xznaal had sent him the odd snippet of technical information.

'Lord Gerayhavunn hass kept hiss sside of the bargain,' Xznaal concluded, inhaling loudly. Greyhaven had been happy to relate his part in the scheme, the Martian had been more reticent. 'Now we sshall keep ourss. With our ssupport,' he wheezed, 'he sshall rule thiss country ass he sseess fit, and,' another hiss,'together we sshall ussher in an age of interplanetary co-operation.'

'All it needs is this Martian ship,' Greyhaven proclaimed, flinging his arms wide. 'We've got supporters on the ground, we've got troops and equipment, but with just one Martian war rocket, we can suppress any opposition.

But we don't need guns, we don't need bombs. Just think: a thousand new factories, pouring out technology that's a century ahead of anything on the market at the moment. It's the start of a new Industrial Revolution, with Britain at the forefront! Jobs, prosperity, security, international prestige and power. Not just international: Interplanetary!

Interstellar! Intergalactic! Together, humanity and the Martians will travel to the stars hand in hand.'

'Oh yes, Lord Greyhaven,' the Doctor shouted, although he was almost face-to-face with him. 'I can see what's in it for you. You think you'l go down in history as the man who put the Great back into Great Britain and the sofa back into the United States of America. The suns will never set on the British Empire.' He turned to Xznaal. 'But you won't be going hand-in-hand anywhere. Martians don't have hands. What exactly do the Martians get from this deal?'

Benny could imagine Xznaal's eyes narrowing behind his visor. 'Marss iss in itss dying dayss. Over a million yearss of civilissation, of technological progressss, iss coming to an end.'

'Your mineral wealth is exhausted,' Benny said. She'd seen the worked-out mines, the metal stripped from old buildings to complete new ones. At one point, the Martian civilisation had spread from the poles almost to the equator. Something had caused massive retrenchment even before the Thousand Day War. Most archaeologists agreed that there must have been an ecological disaster.

Xznaal faced her. 'Ssummerfield, my entire planet iss exhaussted.' He paused to draw breath. 'For centuriess there hass been no new metal,

no new ssource of energy. 'Another pause. 'Al Martian life iss dying from the ssmallesst plant to the largesst beasst of burden. Our blood is thin, my people infertile. Within a century, our world will be dead.'

'So you want to plunder Earth?' the Doctor countered.

'There's no question of "plunder", Doctor,' Greyhaven snapped. 'We wil open a trading relationship with the Martian people. Both planets will benefit.'

'In the lasst few centuriess, our major citiess have become depopulated. Our people are impotent and disseassed.

Our fieldss are barren. Lord Geryahavunn hass been assssissting uss.'

'Staines,' Greyhaven prompted.

The Home Secretary pul ed a test tube from his jacket pocket.

'Martian soil,' Benny said. It was one of the tubes from the crashed helicopter, or one very similar.

'Not quite,' Greyhaven said, taking it from his colleague. 'Martian soil is little more than rust. It's mildly radioactive and completely sterile. You have as much chance as growing crops on the hul of this spaceship as in Martian soil.'

He handed the test tube to the Martian Lord. 'But when Xznaal's men analyse the contents of this test tube, they will discover that our scientists have reintroduced biological agents that make the soil fertile. It is a simple chemical treatment process.'

Xznaal's held the tube in his vast pincers. 'Our sscientisstss theorissed that ssuch a processss would exisst, but without raw materialss, it remained just a theory.'

'One of my refineries is already producing the fertiliser. To human eyes it is a laughably cheap procedure, but it will save an entire planet. Soon, space freighters built by British Aerospace will be transporting the fertiliser, and raw materials like it to Mars. '

The Doctor straightened. 'Not Martian warships?'

Xznaal hissed. 'Thiss will be the only war rocket needed to ssecure our interesstss here. Thiss iss not an invassion, Doctor, thiss iss a trading

partnersship.'

'The Martian ship is here for the same reason we maintain the garrison on Gibraltar,' Greyhaven explained.

'Exactly,' Staines brightened. He was plucking up his courage now. 'I must say, Teddy, I was a little sceptical before, but the more I hear, the more it sounds like an excel ent idea.'

'I take it Staines gets to keep his job in the new order?' Benny said.

'Oh yes. He will be Home Secretary and Chancel or, I wil be the Prime Minister, serving Xznaal as head of state.'

'This doesn't sound very democratic,' the Doctor noted. 'Don't the British people get a say in all this?'

'No,' Greyhaven said coldly. 'There is nothing to discuss. Once the situation has stabilised, dissenters may be allowed to emigrate.'

'And if they don't want to?'

'Then they won't be allowed to dissent. The ill-informed opinions of a rabble won't stand in the way of mankind's destiny. People want strong government, they want security, they want a better standard of living. Do you seriously think that the current generation of politicians can provide that when they spend most of their time arguing amongst themselves over trivia and they are afraid to look beyond next week, let alone into the new millennium?

No offence, David.'

'None taken, Teddy.' The second half of the speech was almost word-for-word what Staines had put in his electoral address.

The Doctor's mouth was open, ready to object when there was a rumbling noise far away from them. Another sound the same. Benny turned to the Doctor, who was frowning.

'Lord Xznaal,' a disembodied voice echoed, 'we are under attack.'

The Martian roared, turning to face Greyhaven.

'What is happening?' the human asked. He couldn't speak Martian.

'Vissual,' Xznaal barked. A hologlobe lit up between them all. It showed the underside of the Martian vessel. The engine cowlings at

the rear were flaring and flashing with tiny explosions. A combination of anti-aircraft fire and surface-to-air missiles, and quite a fierce attack. The compartment that they were in was at the other end of the vast craft, and they could feel the blasts.

'Are we threatened?' Greyhaven asked.

Xznaal was studying a damage report that was scrolling across the screen. 'No,' he concluded. 'You told me that you had your country'ss military under control.'

Greyhaven squirmed a little. 'I also said that there were bound to be military units that remained loyal to the old regime. Can you focus on the source of the attack?'

Xznaal hissed the order, and the image switched to the scene below. The crowds were dispersing, or rather they were fleeing up the Strand in panic. The picture panned around, locating and zooming in on a trio of soldiers nestling on the roof of a building. They had set up a mortar, and were firing it at the Martian ship as fast as they could reload it. The operator of the camera quickly found a couple of similar groups.

'Nine men,' Greyhaven spat, 'hardly a ful -scale rebellion. Look there, my boys are already moving in on them.'

'They are UNIT troops,' Staines was musing.

'UNIT?' Xznaal asked, raising a claw.

'A United Nations force,' the Home Secretary said.

'The foreign powers are united against us?' Xznaal roared. 'They dare to defy my will?'

'I m-mean,' Staines couldn't finish. The Doctor and Greyhaven were both glaring at him.

The Martian Lord scrutinised his human ally. 'Thiss iss Earth'ss ressponsse?'

The Doctor clutched the lapels of his frock coat. 'You see, Xznaal? Humanity has united against you. You can't defeat the entire human race, not with one war rocket.'

Xznaal sucked air through his teeth, as if he was in physical pain.

'Then humanity sshall ssee the full might of the Martian war machine. 'He took a deep breath and began to bark an order to his gunner. 'Bring the cannons to bear on the crowd. Wipe them out, level the -'

'No!' the Doctor shouted.

Xznaal hesitated.

The Doctor fixed Xznaal with a stare. 'This is an historic opportunity. Greyhaven is right about that, whatever his failings. Seize the moment, negotiate peace with the humans. You said it yourself, Xznaal, your planet is dying.

Humans might be less advanced than Martians, but the gap is only a matter of fifty years or so and they're catching up. The two planets wil wipe each other out, and you know it.'

Xznaal hissed.

'Let me broker a fair peace between Earth and Mars,' the Doctor pleaded, 'the whole of Earth, the whole of Mars.

A settlement that isn't reliant on sectional interests.'

'What of your interests, Doctor?' Greyhaven said calmly.

The Doctor turned to face him, narrowing his eyes.

'You're an alien, are you?'

'Well, yes and no,' he replied evasively.

'You're not from Earth. You're certainly not from Mars.'

'That's right,' he conceded.

'Then what right do you have to interfere in our affairs?'

Xznaal's head was cocked to one side. 'The Time Lordss are forbidden to interfere under the termss of the Galactic Consstitution,' he muttered suspiciously.

'Yet this Doctor does,' Staines piped up. 'Now, my knowledge of the law might be limited to that of the planet Earth, young man, but it sounds as if you are outside your jurisdiction.' He clearly had no idea

how ridiculous he sounded.

Xznaal scratched the bridge of his noseguard with the tip of his claw. 'Are you acting with the authority of the High Council?'

'Not explicitly,' the Doctor conceded a little uncomfortably,' but if I were to contact them, then I am sure they would authorise my actions.'

Xznaal lifted his claw, twisting it around so that the great pincers were pointing at the Doctor's head. 'Then we will have to enssure that you don't have that opportunity.'

There was a hiss from the intercom system.

'Lord Xznaal, a human aerocraft is approaching. Tactical analysis indicates that it is rotor-propelled, and heavily armed. It poses a threat.'

The hologlobe displayed it, a helicopter gunship coming in low over the buildings.

There was a tap on Benny's shoulder. The Doctor was standing next to her, nodding towards the door. She nodded and edged towards it with him. Xznaal and Greyhaven were studying the image intently.

'It may be time to demonstrate our power,' Greyhaven conceded.

Benny had backed into the glass door. While the Doctor was still fishing for the control, Staines glanced their way.

'They are escaping!' he spluttered.

Xznaal's arm arced up, sweeping through the hologlobe and nearly batting Staines aside to get a clear shot.

'Deep breath,' the Doctor whispered to Benny.

The Martian's gun burst into life, and there was a noise so loud, the air pulsed.

Benny stared at it, saw the flash of the muzzle.

The Doctor's hand was on her neck, tugging her down.

The transparent door crazed as if someone had just driven a juggernaut through it.

Both she and the Doctor were through the doorway before the shards of glass had finished falling. Benny squeezed her eyes shut to protect them.

It was like diving into a swimming pool - the air was so much colder out of the reception chamber. More than that -

the amount of available oxygen had just become rather more limited. She opened her eyes to find that it was much darker, too.

The Doctor ran through the wide corridor, used to the light and thin air. She fol owed, already wheezing. He was moving with a reassuring confidence.

The Martian ship rocked. Presumably the helicopter was beginning to loose off its air-to-air missiles.

The Doctor was clambering up a ladder, the rungs of which were almost a metre apart. She followed as best she could, her chest tight.

The Doctor pulled open a hatch above his head, and warm night air seeped in.

'We're moving!' Benny shouted. She hadn't realised until she poked her head out of the hatch.

'I know,' the Doctor replied. 'Heading towards Whitehall.' He was already outside, standing astride, like a ship's captain at the wheel. Benny clambered out, pul ing herself up by tugging the tails of his frock coat.

When she was out, the Doctor kicked the hatch shut and held the sonic screwdriver over it. Something fizzed and sparked. They were perched on one of the ship's fins.

The drive systems were silent as a hot air balloon's. Underneath them, though, the noise was horrendous. It was a chaotic mix of gunfire, artillery and screaming civilians caught in the crossfire.

The flash of gun muzzles and the crump of grenades. The Martian ship hadn't fired on the surface, not a single warrior had left the ship. The fierce fighting down there was strictly human versus human.

Benny felt safe up here, she realised. This ship should have been the focus for the attack, but nothing seemed to be troubling it. Benny would much rather be here, two hundred feet in the air, with a million

tons of Martian armour between her and the ground, than down on the streets.

A helicopter that she hadn't even heard exploded half a mile ahead of them. Its rotor blades were backlit by the burning fuselage as it plummeted down somewhere between Horse Guards Parade and St James Park.

The Doctor stood there, watching it fall through the night sky.

'What do we do?' she called.

The Doctor began striding over to the edge, quite a distance. Benny tried to keep up and quickened her pace.

After a few moments, she caught up with him, almost going over the side in the process. For the briefest moment there was nothing beneath one of her feet but a two-hundred foot drop down to the war torn streets of SW1.

'How do we get down?'

He turned to her, a sad smile on his face. 'Ask me again in a week's time,' he replied.

The ship was slowing down again, turning through about thirty degrees,

'Doctor, I know everything there is to know about Martians, why don't I know about this? Even if we beat Xznaal tonight, the historical implications of this are huge. Why didn't I know? There were Martians at my wedding and no-one mentioned this, no-one at all. And I met Bambera a few years from now. That time we fought your evil duplicate at Buckingham Palace. Why didn’t she recognise me then, if we’d already met?'

The Doctor stood for a moment, watching the fires burning in St James Park. A couple of air-to-air missiles streaked past, like fireworks. There was fresh gunfire, but from much further away, South of the river.

Benny realised that he wasn't going to answer. 'Did you know this was going to happen?'

He didn't hesitate. 'No.'

'Before you changed, you seemed to know everything about everything.'

The Doctor turned to face her, firelight reflected in his face and his hair. 'No-one knows everything there is to know about everything. No-one knows everything there is to know about even the smal est, simplest thing. '

'You always used to have something up your sleeve. There was always a plan. You used to say that you could never be too careful.'

'In the end he learnt that he was right. However much you plot, however much you try to think ahead, to second-guess, to predict what wil come, you'l never get everything exactly right. How can anyone rewrite history when no-one can even read it properly?'

Benny looked out over the city. They'd passed the worst of the fighting, which hadn't spil ed out much further than Trafalgar Square itself. Whole sections of the city were blacked out. The power must be down. The more she saw, the more Benny wanted to stay up here above it all.

The ship was descending. The Doctor peered over the side. 'We're barely clearing the rooftops now. This may be our only chance - it's not too far.'

To prove his point, he leapt over the edge.

Benny gasped, hurrying over to where he had been.

The roof was so close, it almost caught her out - literally only three feet away. The Doctor was already on his feet, brushing himself down. It was a sloped roof, but he'd landed on quite a solid-looking ledge.

The ship was moving at walking pace. Benny had to jog along it to get back level with the Doctor. She jumped across, trying to see the manoeuvre as a one metre hop rather than a five storey drop. This was no more dangerous than running for the bus, she told herself.

Her feet found the ledge, although the Doctor needed to steady her.

'Wel done,' the Doctor congratulated, grinning.

The Martian ship continued to drift past. The mortar attack and the

helicopter hadn't even scratched the wax-like coating, let alone the metal beneath.

Benny realised that she'd been clinging to the Doctor rather more intently and rather longer than she felt fully comfortable with. He grinned down at her.

'How do we get down from here?'

'That's easy,' the Doctor replied, pointing over to the metal fire escape.

Benny's feet were still trying to find the ground when she felt the Doctor's hands on her hips, lifting her down.

'Come on!' the Doctor shouted, grabbing her arm and pul ing her along.

Benny looked up. The Martian ship was still only travelling at walking pace, but it drifted over the rooftops with the inevitability of a thundercloud. The whole sky was dark metal, twisted into alien shapes. They jogged underneath it, clearing its underside.

'Don't look back!' the Doctor yel ed at her.

Benny swung her head forwards. 'The UNIT office!' she shouted. The ship was heading straight for UNIT. Half a dozen troops in body armour and powder-blue helmets were coming out of the door, setting up position.

'Halt or I fire!' one shouted, until the Doctor waved a UNIT pass underneath his nose.

'Get clear, Lieutenant, there's nothing you can do,' the Doctor bellowed, still moving for the door.

The sound of hatchways retracting, metal grinding against metal.

The soldiers stood their ground, level ing their machine guns.

'They're using sonic cannons!' Benny called back. 'You haven't a chance.'

She was through the door, now, into the deserted reception. It was brightly-lit, with a reception desk that curved smoothly around. Large pot plants were placed around the area to reinforce the impression that this was just another governmental agency. The illusion was spoilt when the Doctor reached over the desk and flicked the switch

that opened the entrance into the rest of the building - there weren't many quangos whose office doors were built from three-inch armour-plating.

She followed him through, trying to close the door behind her.

'There's no time,' the Doctor cried, grabbing her wrist.

There was a sound like a heavy metal band testing their amps, ready for an open air concert. Even though she had been clutching her head, it left Benny's ears bleeding and unable to hear the screaming of the guards outside.

She stumbled after the Doctor, trying to remember how long it took a sonic cannon to power up between shots.

She could hear it cycling up into audible frequencies.

The second blast smashing into the front of the building, shattering not just the glass but the stone and metal supports. They were aiming low, firing diagonal y down right at the base of the building, she guessed, the place a lumberjack would aim his axe if the UNIT Building was a tree.

'Don't look back,' the Doctor screamed at her, pul ing her through the office. She barely heard him, and was dizzy now. Had her inner ear been damaged by the blast?

The office had already been evacuated, so quickly that top secret information was still displayed on computer monitors. Outside, the entire facade of the building was sliding and crashing to the ground onto the bodies of those poor men on the pavement outside. It bought them a little time: the Martians would wait for the dust to settle before

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67

The third blast removed the armoured doorway along with the wal on which it was mounted. The desk, the plant pots and everything in the four storeys above the reception exploded or crashed down onto something that had exploded. The sonic cannon was cutting through the building like a loaf - hacking off slice after slice. It was as savage as it was methodical. Clouds of dust raced past her, as though they too were trying to escape.

As they passed through the door on the back wall, the next blast caught the office, obliterated everything within it.

There was a terrible wrenching sound as tonnes upon tonnes of cracked and brittle masonry plummeted through the ceiling. Benny's back was pelted by tiny pieces of rubble.

The next blast would catch up with them. That was Benny's first thought. The second was that the room they were in now was a landing, with a broad stairway and a lift shaft. The Doctor was brandishing the sonic screwdriver. The thick lift doors slid open.

'Down!' he ordered.

'What do you mean dow-'

He shoved her through the doorway.

There wasn't a lift car. Benny was falling through the dark. She pulled her feet together and kept her hands at her sides, trying not to tense up. What sort of lifestyle was it where you instinctively knew what to do if you find yourself in freefall without a parachute?

She hit the top of the lift car a little awkwardly. The Doctor joined her a second or so later. They'd only fallen twenty feet or so. It was enough to escape the next blast, which roared overhead in a hurricane of rubble. The force of the blast kept the debris in the air, rather than letting it drop down the shaft after them. It also caught the lift cable, making the car they were on rock as if it was on a rough sea.

The Doctor had adjusted the sonic screwdriver to make it into a cutting tool and was burning through the roof of the lift.

Above them there was a series of explosive bursts, like grenades.

'The gas main ...' she whispered.

There was a rushing noise, a flash of light. She could picture the wall of flame rolling across the landing towards them.

'Excel ent,' the Doctor exclaimed, glancing up. 'Quickly,' and together they dropped into the lift car. Almost as they hit the floor, the doors slid open with a chime. The Doctor ushered her out.

It was the UNIT underground car park. They'd come in this way, and Bessie would be down here somewhere. The power was down, and the

room was lit by dul pools of emergency lighting. For the first time, Benny looked back, and her face was caught by the rush of hot air coming down the lift shaft.

A burst from the sonic screwdriver and the doors slid shut as the first flames rolled down past them.

The Doctor and Benny stood in silence, catching their breath as the fire raged safely behind the thick metal doors.

The metal warped, the paint blistered, the doors rattled on their runners, but they held. The Doctor passed her his handkerchief, and she wiped the blood from her ears.

'What a stroke of luck,' said the Doctor. 'That fire means that the Ice Warriors won't be making any little visits down here in person.'

Twenty feet above them, another section of the building collapsed. And another.

'It also means that we are trapped down here.'

Powerful lights snapped on, twin beams fixing them from the other side of the low-vaulted car park.

'Oh, I wouldn't say that, Mrs Summerfield,' a familiar voice cal ed.

Benny squinted past the source of the sound. The Brigadier was sitting in the driver's seat of Bessie. The light came from the car's headlamps.

They hurried over. 'They wouldn't let me go with the assault team, so I stayed down here. This level was designed to withstand a nuclear blast - judging by the tactics of that space rocket the gunnery officer doesn't even know we have a basement.'

'He's covered us with tonnes of rubble, but that just means we're even better shielded,' the Doctor informed her with a grin.

'And buried in,' Benny repeated.

It was the Brigadier's turn to smile. 'Mrs Summerfield, when we built this place twenty-five years ago, we didn't forget to build a door. There's a way down to the Northern Line so wide you can drive a tank through it.'

He glanced over at the pair of Chieftains lurking in the corner, then back at the Doctor.

'In the circumstances, I think that Bessie here might be a better choice. We need speed. '

'Where's everyone else?' the Doctor asked him.

'Those not involved with the assault moved out: they've gone to safe houses. Bambera is heading for Windsor with her staff.'

The Doctor was puzzled. 'They left you behind?'

'I stayed,' the Brigadier said simply. 'For you.'

'But the risk -'

'Doctor, Bambera might not realise it, but you are the only person on this planet that can stop those things. That makes you our most valuable asset. And, of course, you're a friend. The enemy have secured the capital. There's nothing more that we can do here for the moment. Let's get out of London, to safety and you can work out how to stop this without any more loss of life.'

C

hapter Nine

Our Friends From Mars

Wednesday, May 7th 1997

The exact sequence of events of the previous night was still confusing, and the newsrooms were still assimilating what had happened.

Lord Greyhaven and the Home Secretary had gone aboard the Martian ship. Some unconfirmed reports suggested that another two people, a man and a woman, had also been taken aboard. It was around then the attack on the Martian ship had taken place. A group of soldiers had opened fire with mortars, some of these had fallen short and caused panic in the crowd. Al this time the Martian ship had remained immobile, and apparently it hadn't been damaged in the attack. Later, a statement from the Ministry of Defence said that the soldiers firing on the ship had been acting against direct orders, and had not been part of the force sent to the Square to contain the crowd.

Supporting this official line, the main body of soldiers moved in on those firing at the ship. Some civilians - reports varied, but probably

only a handful - were caught in the crossfire. This had caused a stampede, limited looting and a couple of power failures. The rebel soldiers had commandeered an assault helicopter. When it was sent against the Martian vessel, it was finally provoked into opening fire. Some sort of energy ray destroyed the helicopter that had locked on to the alien craft, and then the Martian moved a little way into Whitehall to demolish an office building with the same weapon. The soldiers had commandeered the office block to launch their attack on the Martians.

Within half an hour, the spacecraft had returned to its position. The fighting was already over by ten o'clock and the third Martian Proclamation:

'PEOPLE OF THE UNITED KINGDOM. YOUR ASTRONAUTS COMMITTED A TERRIBLE CRIME, THROUGH

THEIR IGNORANCE. THIS SHOULD NOT BE THE WAY OUR RACES FIRST MEET. LET US PUT TODAY

BEHIND US, AND WORK TOGETHER. WE HAVE MUCH TO OFFER ONE ANOTHER. YOUR FELLOW

HUMAN CLANS ABANDONED YOU, YET YOU FOUGHT FOR YOUR BELIEFS. THIS WE RESPECT. WE

HAVE TALKED TO YOUR LORD GREYHAVEN, HE IS A BRAVE, BOLD MAN. LET US LIVE IN PEACE, PEOPLE OF THE UNITED KINGDOM AND OF MARS. '

Tensions on the ground had noticeably lessened by the time Lord Greyhaven and the Home Secretary emerged, broad grins on their faces.

Greyhaven, surrounded by the world's television cameras explained that there had been a terrible misunderstanding, but he and Staines had quickly come to an arrangement with the Martians. There were many exciting opportunities ahead. The few thousand people stil in the Square cheered him as he made his way from the area.

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Every paper led with a full page photograph of the alien ship hovering over London. There wasn't a great deal more variation in the headlines. 'We are not alone' was used by a couple of them. The Mail had 'UFOria'. The Telegraph had 'ET Our Friends, But The EU Are Not'. The Independent printed the declaration of peaceful intent in full. The

Mirror had 'Mars: Planet of Peace'. Only The Times seemed to remember the Mars 97 with 'Britons on Mars, Martians in Britain'.

They weren't looking at what was happening in the rest of London or in Washington. News of the Prime Minister's assassination came too late for the papers. Before anyone had time to take in the tragic news, a press statement announced that evidence had been uncovered by MI5 of a conspiracy underway to overthrow the entire British political system and to kill the Prime Minister. Members of Parliament and other figures were arrested, some service chiefs had been suspended from duty. The conspiracy went deep into the civil service, the armed forces and both Houses of Parliaments. Many prominent people were involved, a number of whom were still at large.

Under the circumstances, it had been agreed to dissolve Parliament, pending a full investigation.

Any other day, the greatest constitutional crisis since the Restoration would have dominated the headlines and thrown the country into panic, perhaps even civil war. Today, though, people were too busy rejoicing that the Martians were here and that they had come in peace to even notice.

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It was light at six o'clock.

The police would tell you that at that time, London's streets are almost empty. The street sweepers and delivery men haven't quite started work, the trains haven't started arriving. Taxi drivers sit dozing in their ranks. In the big hotels, the kitchen staff are gearing up for breakfast, but the foreign night porter is still on duty and only a handful of the guests have received their alarm cal s. Cafes and markets are beginning to open, but they don't have customers.

This morning something was different, and it took a moment to work out what it was. It's like breathing: you do it all the time, of course, but every so often you're sitting down, relaxing, reading perhaps, and you become conscious of it. You feel every inhalation rushing through the hair in your nostrils, you feel it easing down your throat and inflating your lungs. You breathe out, acutely aware of your diaphragm contracting. For a while you forget how to breathe without thinking about it. In moments like that, you visualise all the other things your body does without telling you. The blood pumping around

your brain, the skin cells you're shedding, the food that's slowly being turned into shit in your stomach, and then you think about the chemicals flashing and winking in your brain that make you what you are. You sit there, wondering if you'l ever be able to concentrate on anything else again, or whether the steady rhythms of your body that have been there al your life will keep you in a hypnotic trance forever. Two minutes later, you've forgotten all about it again, and turned back to your book or television.

The difference was the traffic. The sound of cars was normal y there in the background. Not the noise of individual engines revving or vehicles whooshing past with car radios blaring, but the flatter, more even sound of tyres against tarmac, a dull sound like rushing wind that's always there in every town centre. The invisible cars that are forever somewhere in the distance. The sound that is somehow the same volume whatever the time of the day or night.

In London, more than any other city in Britain, it is ever-present. It pervades every shop, every house, every office.

There isn't a window that doesn't pulse, or a pavement that doesn't hum with the vibration. Even on the platform of a Tube station, deep underground, it's there. No-one ever notices unless they are by themselves, sitting in a park or waiting for a train that never comes.

But when it's not there, it's as though the city is holding its breath, or its heart has stopped beating.

There were sounds - burglar alarms that were still ringing, car alarms that hadn't yet run down. Every so often a police siren would wail past. Loudest of al was the birdsong.

A helicopter passed overhead.

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Alexander Christian ducked behind the police box, scanning the sky as it receded into the distance.

When he had finally broken cover, and walked down Whitehall, he realised that something was missing. It took a couple of seconds for him to register that it was the Martian spaceship. If only it had al been a dream, he thought, before wondering where the ship was now.

The burnt-out shell of the police mobile HQ was the only remaining police or army vehicle in Trafalgar Square. The corpses had all been

removed, but the ground was littered with patches of blood and spent cartridges. A copy of the Evening Standard blew past.

He wondered when Bambera had noticed that he'd gone. Her plan was that he would head to Windsor with a group of the UNIT boys. Christian preferred to stay in London. He'd never been one to run away from a fight.

He'd expected more troops on the ground, but he soon realised why the area was so deserted - the whole of Whitehall, the Square and the Strand had been sealed off, along with a few of the back streets. The manpower was concentrated on keeping people away from the area. Even so, it was short work to find a gap in the defences and make a way out. Within ten minutes, he was in Covent Garden.

There couldn't have been many, Alexander mused, who had stolen the petty cash box of the United Nations Intelligence Taskforce. It had about seventy pounds in it - a fortune twenty years ago, barely enough to live on now. He didn't have any jewellery or even a watch to barter with. He'd be able to buy food and travel around the Tube if it was operating, but not buy any new clothes or items of kit.

Apart from a couple of sugar cubes, he hadn't eaten since yesterday afternoon at the Lethbridge-Stewart place, so the first order of business was breakfast. Covent Garden had gone upmarket since his day, but he still managed to find a greasy spoon cafe without too much difficulty. Radio One was playing the latest music - Christian hadn't been 'with it' twenty years ago, so it came as no surprise that the music now was louder and more unpleasant now than ever before. Two burly young men were discussing the form guide in their newspaper at one table, a young girl was sitting by herself at another. The proprietor was a lanky Greek chap, who took Christian's money and disappeared into the back to make his fry-up without saying a single word.

'You got a light?' the girl asked. She had an East End accent, long dyed-blonde hair that she kept loose.

He took out a match, and sat next to her. He lit her cigarette, then his own pipe. She wore a tiny cropped T-shirt that might have been sprayed on. It wasn't too difficult to work out what she did for a living. She was fourteen, fifteen at most.

'What were you doing last night?' he asked.

'Same as everyone else,' she said non-committally, 'watching the tel y

and hoping Jeff Goldblum was around, know what I mean?'

He smiled, as if he did. 'The spaceship's gone now.'

'It's over the Tower.'

'The Tower of London?'

'Yeah.' She dragged on her cigarette. 'D'ya want to buy me breakfast?'

'That's all I'll be buying,' he said.

'Fine.'

Christian went over to the counter and shouted through that he wanted another meal. The Greek emerged ten seconds later with both plates and took some more money from him.

The news was coming up, Christian listened out for it.

The girl sat there, taking her time over the bacon. 'What d'you think?' she asked.

70

The news bulletin came on - a group of MPs and senior army men had tried to launch a coup last night. This had been countered by loyal army units, and after fighting in the streets around Whitehall last night, most of the plotters had been arrested. Parliament had been suspended, and until the situation had stabilised, there was to be a Provisional Government led by Lord Edward Greyhaven. To prevent the escape of the remaining plotters, all ports and airports would be closed for two days. In the interests of law and order, the major cities would be under curfew during the hours of darkness for the next week or so. People should remain calm, and go to work as normal.

'They didn't even mention the Martian ship,' Christian laughed, unable to believe the gal of it.

'I'm scared,' the girl said, stubbing out her cigarette and pulling out another.

'Everyone is,' Christian said, finishing off his fried egg.

'I like that Lord Greyhaven, though. I think he'd make a good Prime Minister.'

'You're not worried about the curfew affecting business?'

She smiled as she chewed, her mouth was full. 'I'n't he bold? I don't just work nights. I'm in what they call a recession-proof industry. Whatever happens I'll be OK.' She had a tiny bruise on her temple, scars on her wrists, and underneath that T-shirt he could see her ribs. Christian wanted to hold her, to take her little body and give her a hug. If he could just take her home, give her a bath and a comfortable bed to sleep in she'd be safe. But that was what she wanted silly old men like him to think, wasn't it?

'I'm sure you wil ,' he replied, getting up.

'Thanks for breakfast.'

'Thanks for talking to me.'

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By seven o'clock, the phone lines of the Japanese Embassy on Piccadil y were jammed. Across London, all the embassies were fielding calls from worried tourists. At any given time, there were tens of thousands of Japanese in the United Kingdom, seeing the sights of London, Stratford, Bath and York. None of them wanted to be in a country occupied by a hostile alien lifeform. Most of these tourists were middle-aged, rich and respectable, the remainder were the children of rich businessmen. Either way, there were many powerful people at home scrutinising the actions of the embassy. The beleaguered staff were fortunate that the phone system had crashed last night - the London exchanges could only deal with local calls.

The embassy staff were quite busy enough trying to establish what the situation in Britain actually was. Tokyo had demanded clarification as to who was in charge, whether the situation was stable, whether Britain was still honouring treaties and trade agreements.

Mr Fukuyama and his wife had been among the first to arrive in person at the embassy. They were keen to leave the country. Before he had retired, Mr Fukuyama had worked in the local tax office, so he was used to a steady stream of phone calls from irate people. He volunteered his services to help take the calls from his fellow tourists.

The embassy staff gratefully agreed. They were trying to charter a fleet of aircraft to get their citizens out, but then so were al the other embassies, and for the moment at least the airports remained completely closed. A dozen Japanese film crews were in Britain - most

of these were now within the embassy itself.

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It was unusual for Eve to be a bystander in a television studio, it felt odd to be standing behind a television camera.

It was a little after eight o'clock. Lord Edward Greyhaven, the Prime Minister of Great Britain, was sitting at a desk in front of a bookcase full of fake books, in a BBC studio, recording an address that would be broadcast that morning and at intervals throughout the day. First he recounted the events of the previous night, how a group a soldiers and politicians had attempted to attack the Martian ship. The Provisional Government had been established because they were now in a new era: the existence of real live Martians presented an opportunity that the old system would have been slow to take advantage of. He explained the benefits of co-operation with the Martians and how alien technology would help Britain and eventual y the world.

'Politicians often promised jam tomorrow if only we'd make sacrifices today. The time has come, if you'll pardon the expression, to feast on Martian jam. I am pleased to announce that thanks to the savings that the simplification of government al ows, my first act as Prime Minister is to cut both VAT and income tax by five percent. We shal be building new factories in the depressed areas of the North East and Wales, with many more to come. We were promised a more prosperous future - well, it's 1997 and high time that we had the future. Welcome to the prosperous today. Thank you.'

The director was beaming. 'Excellent, Lord Greyhaven, excellent.'

Edward stood, unclipping the mike and tucking his speech back into his Wallace and Gromit ringbinder. 'That should calm things down a bit.'

'And we're real y cutting income tax?'

'That was Xznaal's suggestion, yes.'

'But how do we balance public spending and all that sort of thing?' Staines asked, unafraid to hide his past life as a junior treasury spokesman.

'Xznaal said that he could. He says he also knows ways to reduce pol ution and unemployment, traffic congestion and global warming.'

'Crikey. I suppose as well as al those spaceships and holograms and other gadgets, the Martians have also had millions of years to perfect chartered accountancy.'

Greyhaven smiled forgivingly. 'That must be it. What is the state of the nation, Staines?'

'Things are a little more subdued than we thought, Teddy. Problems at the ports, of course, but they are logistical ones: thousands of people with nowhere to go. We've promised full compensation to holidaymakers and tour operators. We'll need to do something about repatriating foreigners.'

'Will you indeed?' Eve asked archly. She hadn't known the Home Secretary long, but already had a well-developed sense of hostility towards him.

'Only if they want to go, Eve,' Edward said hurriedly, brushing her cheek with his hand. 'David, I'll need to talk to you later about tracking down the Doctor and Christian - one o'clock?'

The Home Secretary nodded.

'The Doctor?' Eve said. 'Mid-thirties, dresses like he's read too much Dickens?'

Greyhaven turned to her. 'The very fellow.'

'I saw him at the Space Museum, he thought he recognised me. I'll keep an eye out for him. So what's on your agenda, then?' Eve asked.

'I am in meetings with Lord Xznaal for much of the rest of the day, that's why I'm recording my message now.'

'So I won't be seeing much of you?'

He brushed her cheek. 'I promised you the first American interview with the new Prime Minister.'

'You know that everyone wants to see Xznaal, too. Where's the meeting, Downing Street?'

'The Tower of London. Xznaal has taken a shine to it and so the Martians wil be based there. We've called in some refrigeration engineers to adjust the climate for them. A simple process, apparently,

and the Tower will be fully converted in three days.'

'Mars is a cold world,' Staines informed her.

'Yes,' she said, trying to match its coolness. She turned to Edward. 'Any chance of a talk to Xznaal?'

'I think that might be counterproductive for the moment. If Staines' reaction is typical then the public might react unfavourably towards our new allies. Let's just wait until things have settled down a little bit.'

Greyhaven had described the Martians as large reptilian creatures. They sounded quite palatable - fifty years of science fiction B-movies and corny TV series had prepared the way. They might look a bit like Klingons, but they didn't act like them - Klingons didn't help cut tax and set up trade agreements.

'I think you might be right - but people want to know all about them. What about their history and their culture?

Never mind al that fuss about the Martian fossil last year. Everyone said that that was the greatest scientific discovery of the century. Guess that'll teach people to wait until the end of the century next time.'

'This certainly knocks what the Americans found into a cocked hat,' Staines simpered, smiling knowingly at Eve.

She grimaced back at him.

Greyhaven nodded to her. 'I think you are right. I'll check with Xznaal, and try to set up a meeting between the two of you. A documentary about their history will help people to understand the Martians better.'

Eve tried to stay calm as she was handed another world exclusive.

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By nine o'clock, the breakfast television and radio programmes were drawing to a close. The news editors had been careful not to do anything that might lead to accusations that they had instilled panic in the population. They concentrated on the awe-inspiring prospect of a peaceful alliance with a hitherto unknown race. Reports about the political situation were downplayed in favour of more offbeat coverage: UFO cranks, science fiction writers and comedians got a

great deal more airtime than constitutional lawyers, politicians or police chiefs. In the national interest, no-one asked where the Queen had got to - only she had the power to dissolve Parliament and to confirm the appointment of a Prime Minister.

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EMAIL MESSAGE

From: Power Commission Ltd, London

To: PCL, Washington

Subject: Business Development, United Kingdom

Date: 8/5/97:10.15 BST

Greetings Abe,

It's been a busy day here, but things have calmed down now. As you know, the server went down about eight, approximately the time the UFO turned up! The engineers were here already, and they knew all about the fault, because they were in touch with the manufacturers.

About nine PCL employees were down in Trafalgar Square, the rest of us were out of town. There were a lot of tourists there, and they watched two politicians going aboard for a pow-wow. There was a carnival atmosphere in the Square. Our business partners are in the dark about long-term prospects - some of them are optimistic. PCL will maintain its operation here.

Regards to the kids,

John.

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Eleven o'clock British Summer Time is 6 am in Washington.

Pentagon officials had been trying to determine the situation in the United Kingdom all day. International phone calls to Britain were proving erratic, although they had other means of contacting their embassy.

Every intelligence analyst that could be spared was being flown to Langley.

A host of agencies from the IMF to Omega Sector were put on stand-by. UNIT ONE, the Creative Intelligence division of the American branch of the United Nations Intelligence Taskforce was co-ordinating the groups, while UNIT THREE was liasing with NASA and the White House on the feasibility of a counterstrike on Mars itself.

CIA analysts were treating the situation as an invasion, and the Provisional Government as a puppet organisation.

It happened in third world countries al the time - some faction would receive funding from another power and topple the incumbent president, tyrant or whatever. The foreign power always had a purpose for doing that -

strategic, economic or political reasons.

The military capability of the Martians was unknown. Their ship had arrived without registering on radar, but there was no evidence from the spy satellites that there was more than one ship over the UK, and there wasn't a mothership in orbit, as far as anyone could tel . The ship was a kilometre long, so there could be thousands of Martian troops onboard. It was armed with energy weapons and armour plating, but the ship hadn't demonstrated what analysts called 'Clarke Level' abilities: technology so advanced that it defied current scientific knowledge.

The PCL email was the first news from UNIT.

Oswald held up the printout of the PCL message.

'I can't believe you managed to intercept this. Doug, I think you may just have become the first person to hack into UNIT.'

Doug raised his finger to his lips, looking around the Cafe. The place was busier than ever following the Invasion -

with most phone lines down, email was the only way to send an international message. And you could only do that with some highly il egal hacking into the BT system. 'I didn't do anything.'

'You know about UNIT?'

'Only what I read in FT. The paramilitary meet the paranormal, and go in all guns blazing. So this message is in a UNIT code?' If anyone knew

it was Ozzie. Oswald was a regular at the Cafe. Although he was only twenty-three, he was an expert on the alien incursions that were still meant to be a secret. From the Abominable Snowmen to the Zygons, Oswald knew his stuff. He'd even spoken at conventions in America.

'Not a code as such. It's a simple system based on key phrases. It's been in use for years. '

'It's comic book stuff. I don't understand why they didn't just use a secure line or encryption.'

Oswald nodded thoughtful y. 'That's the scary thing. UNIT clearly no longer have access to the equipment, or they have been compromised. They'd only use this method as a last resort. It's meant to look like an ordinary business letter to any censor or monitor. It's the sort of crypto a Third World country would use, not an European one.'

Doug tried not to think too hard about that. 'So what does the message mean? I've worked out that PCL is UNIT, Abe's the ... President?'

'That's right. "Power Commission" is the United Nations, strictly speaking. "Server" is the local government,

"engineer" means soldier, "manufacturer" means foreign power. It's real y hokey.'

Doug was reading back the message. 'So what they're saying, this bit here, about the engineers already being in contact with the manufacturers, is that the British military were in league with the aliens?'

'Yeah. Told you so.'

'So now you're saying that you knew this was going to happen al along.'

'Well, if you remember, last week I did tell you that the Martian atmosphere was breathable.'

'Sure, just before you told me that Elvis died in November 1995 of diabetes.'

'I played you his last CD,' he laughed, 'what more do you want?'

Oswald scrutinised the printout again, for theatrical effect more than anything else. 'Reading into it, the two guys who went into the saucer

were in on the deal, and those that weren't have been rounded up and put in prison.

That's the "in the dark bit".' He paused. 'The conspiracy runs deeper than I thought.'

Doug laughed, and began wiping down the counter. 'Yeah, but whaddya going to do?' he said in his best Homer Simpson voice.

Oswald fixed him with that intense stare of his. 'We fight back.' He motioned around the Cafe. 'From our state-of-the-art command centre.

At one o'clock precisely, David Staines was let into the Prime Minister's office deep within Number 10 Downing Street.

Greyhaven looked at home already, sitting at the same place as his il ustrious predecessors. On the staircase up to the PM's study there were paintings and later photographs of all the previous occupants of the office, rows and rows of portraits. Like most Britons that passed them, Staines could recognise a dozen or so, the list becoming more complete as he reached the top of the stairs and the twentieth century. He paused at the last photograph. He and the Prime Minister had never been close political y, but they respected one another. Staines had no idea that Greyhaven had been planning to kill him.

There was still a constitutional problem - Greyhaven couldn't just make himself Prime Minister regardless of how many Martians backed his leadership bid. The British constitution being what it is, there was some dispute about what conditions needed to be met - the dissolution of Parliament muddied the waters still further. One thing was for certain: just because Greyhaven had the mace didn't mean he was the Prime Minister. For the moment, officially, he was still only the Acting-Prime Minister.

Staines chose not to draw attention to this. 'Prime Minister,' he oozed.

'Home Secretary.' Greyhaven was studying a typed report and didn't look up at first. Finally, he granted Staines his full attention. 'What is the mood of the country?' he enquired in the tone of voice you would normally used to ask after the health of a maiden aunt.

73

Staines had spent the morning receiving police, army and intelligence reports from around the country. 'It's settling down. The country is nervous, as you'd expect, but most people went to work as normal.

London's more subdued.

We've had some problems in the North - rival army units fighting on the streets in Manchester and Bradford.'

'Our support?'

'All the army units and police chiefs that we contacted beforehand have stayed true to their word. They are helping to keep a lid on things, and at the moment their men are following orders. We've had a few objectors, but not enough to affect operational efficiency. We've got enough people on the ground.'

'Yes. Half the staff at Downing Street were unwilling to serve here, or they're in mourning. I had to order out for lunch. Still, it always was part of the plan to slim down the government machinery. The opposition?'

'Taken by surprise, unaware quite how close we can keep tabs on them. A number of barracks and bases have sealed themselves off and put themselves on full alert, but they aren't moving against us. We've got control of the communications and surveil ance networks, so we'll be able to mobilise against them very quickly. So far there hasn't be a single report that the "no fly" order has been violated by civilian or military aircraft.'

Greyhaven nodded. 'The bases wil be trying to contact each other - keep a very close watch on them. If they start moving, we might need Xznaal to enforce our authority. What else?'

'The SNP are organising a demonstration in Edinburgh tonight. They claim that constitutional y, they are not bound by the terms of the peace treaty with Mars and that England is ignoring them.'

'Big deal. Next.'

'The Archbishop of Canterbury is urging people to remain calm, but not fully to co-operate with the Provisional Government until the situation is more clear. There were vigils at quite a few churches last night. There would be, I suppose.'

Greyhaven raised an eyebrow. 'Really?'

'Well, it's one of the Big Questions, isn't it? Life on other planets. Do you think that Xznaal's a Protestant or a Catholic? The Pope has sought an audience with him, you know.'

'Everyone wants to speak to him, David. Which reminds me: the first few rooms of the Tower will be refrigerated this afternoon. Xznaal wil be holding a reception there at seven. You're invited, of course, as are a number of our colleagues. Could you see that they are warned about his appearance? At the same time, make sure that the press don't know about this - I don't want any telephoto shots of the Martians.' Greyhaven passed across the guest list.

Staines scanned it. 'Miss Waugh will be there, I see.'

'She will,' Greyhaven said levelly.

'But not your wife?'

'My wife is at home, David, a hundred miles from here. How I choose to conduct my private life is my own business.'

Staines could see the newspapers' reaction to the discovery that the Prime Minister had a mistress. The tone of Greyhaven's voice suggested that he wasn't concerned, that he thought the papers had better things to be talking about. The Home Secretary knew better. He didn't dare say anything, but made a mental note to have a word with a couple of his friends in Fleet Street.

'Yes, Prime Minister,' he said.

'The foreign situation seems to be stable - no-one wants to pick a fight with the Martians. Xznaal's proclamation was clear and unambiguous. Too clear, if anything. I'm still not sure what he's planning to do with the American airbases. As for his plans for Eire if the IRA attack our boys...' he shook his head disbelievingly. 'It's been a while since we put the Dail to the sword. And, do you know, despite the Euro-sceptics I don't think that the British government has ever threatened to "smite" the EU before.'

'Teddy, I'm worried.'

Greyhaven frowned in mock-concern. 'Are you, Staines?'

'Yes. You've opened a can of worms. You're using Xznaal to control the country and to crush our enemies, but how do you plan to control them? Quis custodiet ipsos custodes, eh, Teddy?'

'I have my means,' Greyhaven said firmly. 'The Martians serve a useful purpose for the time being, but once our power base is secure, we won't be needing them.'

'You can destroy them?'

'If it proves necessary. It's only one ship, Staines, it wouldn't last long against the RAF. I have the situation under control. Can you say the same about Alexander Christian, or the Doctor?'

Staines chuckled. 'Surely now the Martians are here we don't need to -
'

Greyhaven leapt from his chair and grabbed the lapels of the Home Secretary's jacket. 'Those two are the greatest threats to what we are doing here. Find them, Staines, and kill them.'

'You don't want them captured?'

'So that they are brought here and I can tie them up while I boast about my plans? No, I want them dead. Post that to all police and army units.'

Staines made a note of that. 'Is there any more business?'

'That wil be all, thank you Home Secretary. See you at seven.'

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Just before three o'clock Eve Waugh received a phone cal . She was in her hotel room with Alan, getting ready to go to the Tower of London. They were talking through their plans: they would try and charm Xznaal into granting an interview.

'How do you dress to meet a Martian warlord?' Alan asked her.

'Edward told me to treat it like any other state banquet.'

'That helps,' he chuckled.

'Your tux will be fine,' she assured him.

'And I'm taking my camera but keeping it in my bag?'

'That's right. Don't even try to sneak a shot of the Martian, you might cause an interplanetary diplomatic incident.'

The phone rang. Eve answered it and spoke for a couple of minutes.

'Don't change just yet,' she told Alan when she'd finished. 'Where's Canterbury?'

Alan checked his road atlas. 'About an hour away, I think. South of here.'

'That was the Doctor. He says he wants to talk to us. He's told us exactly where he is and says he wants to meet us at four-thirty. We can get there and back in time for seven?'

'No problem at all, if we leave quickly. I'm sure that your friend Greyhaven would like to know where the Doctor is.

Are you going to tell him?'

Eve hesitated.

Chapter Ten

An Englishman's Home

The Doctor had lit a fire, shaking the match until it went out.

Benny and the Brigadier sat in front of it, nursing the mugs of cocoa he had just made for them. It was getting dark outside, the sun was already dipping behind the orchard. For the moment, they kept the curtains open, watching the view. If Bernice had been in one of her periodic melancholy moods, or if she'd had something a bit stronger to drink than cocoa, she was pretty sure that she would see something deeply symbolic about the blood red sky. The Brigadier was sitting in the Doctor's favourite armchair, so the Time Lord sat down on the sofa, alongside her.

'Miss Waugh is late,' the Brigadier said, a gentle warning in his voice.

'If she was going to call the authorities, she would have done that already,' the Doctor replied.

Their journey to Allen Road had been along something of a scenic route, avoiding the motorways, A-roads and big towns. It hadn't helped that the Doctor had got them lost somewhere south of Maidstone. Tempers had become frayed, but they'd ended up in Adisham just before three o'clock. The Doctor had stopped off at Mrs Darling's shop to buy some milk and bin bags, and to make a quick phone call. Then they'd driven up to the House and parked Bessie safely undercover in the garage. Only then had the Doctor revealed that he'd just told Eve Waugh, the American journalist, and anyone tapping her line, exactly where they were.

'Why did you cal her?' Benny asked.

He had looked puzzled. 'We need al ies. Help. She's a talented young lady, and people in America will listen to what she has to say.'

She and the Brigadier had looked at each other, unsure whether to trust the Doctor's judgement or to run to the hills. After half an hour of cheerful domesticity away from the rioting and alien devastation, they had become more relaxed. The landscape here was peaceful, unchanged by the Martian Invasion. From here it was easy to believe that the spacecraft over London was a mass hallucination or purely a local difficulty for the capital to deal with.

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They didn't need their umbrellas, the Martian ship hovering overhead sheltered them from the light rainfall. There were a couple of dozen of dignitaries: politicians, businessmen, soldiers. All of them were supporters of Greyhaven's cause. They were his co-conspirators, the people who had facilitated his rise to power, although none of them had been let in on the full scheme. Now they were helping to ease the transition between the old government and his regime, and to ensure their continuing support they thought they were being rewarded with a state banquet. For the moment, they were delighted just to be so close to the Martian ship, London's newest tourist attraction.

Greyhaven hadn't really thought about the Tower of London before. It had sat there in the London drizzle for almost a mil ennium, and for most of that time it had been a part of the landscape. A thousand years ago the squared-off Norman architecture of the White Tower must have been as striking a symbol of alien occupation as the Martian warship was now. A thousand years before that, Roman biremes had ploughed down the Thames, and to the eyes of the ancient Britons they must have seemed like Martians with their gleaming armour, their strange customs and advanced technology.

'The ravens have gone,' Greyhaven said. 'The Yeoman warders took them away. They and their families voted to leave rather than serve the Provisional Government.'

'What's more, your little American friend isn't here.'

Greyhaven checked the crowd, already aware that Staines was right. The Home Secretary hadn't finished his analysis. 'She must have found something that's more important than her first sight of a Martian.'

'Indeed,' Greyhaven said acidly.

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Xznaal watched the small gathering on the hologlobe. The head of his scientific research division, Vrgnur, was standing opposite him, studying the image.

'Humans take some getting used to,' Vrgnur said.

'Indeed,' Xznaal grunted back. The human body was a stunted parody of the Martian form, but with an endoskeleton. Many centuries ago, Martian scientists had concluded that an oxygen-breathing lifeform

was a theoretical absurdity. Xznaal found himself wondering what effect a sonic blast would have on such a creature.

Without even a shell to crack open, the damage would be entirely internal. Every one of those brittle bones would shatter like pottery. Every nerve would burst. It would mean instant death, even at the lowest settings, Xznaal was sure of that. The only question was if human physiology was sufficiently developed for them to feel pain as they died.

'Nothing as bizarre ever evolved on Mars. Would your authorise the capture of a couple of specimens for study?'

Vrgnur was one of the clan's foremost scientists, and his insight into human anatomy would be invaluable.

'That might be considered... undiplomatic, for the moment,' Xznaal answered. 'Soon it will be possible.'

It was time for him to meet these creatures. Xznaal stepped up onto the magnetic lift platform.

'You will really honour such creatures with a ceremonial banquet?' Vrgnur asked.

'They do have some degree of sentience. Their chieftain, Lord Gerayhayvun, tells me that this ceremony wil secure my legal claim to this world.'

'They are cattle, my Lord. Would you ask an animal permission to enter his cave?'

'We have not yet established a firm grip on this world,' Xznaal warned. 'Until then we shall treat the humans as we would any serfs won in battle, with courtesy. Activate the magnetic beam.'

Vrgnur reached across to the large lever mounted on the wall, yanking it to release the exit hatch. It slid open beneath Xznaal, and the platform began descending gently.

Below him, the humans were staring up, murmuring. They had gathered on an area called 'Tower Green', within both sets of curtain walls.

The heat.

He had waited until nightfall before emerging, and the light level was almost exactly right. But the heat was overwhelming. As he floated down towards the ground, Xznaal found himself gasping for breath, sucking in warm, wet air. For the first few instants, until he was used to it, breathing Terran air was like drowning in soup. It was an odd sensation: the thick air was rich with nitrogen, but so much more besides. Earth was a whole new world of smells: the air was damp and fetid like a rubbish dump, the air buzzed with smell of loam, and dung and choking petrol fumes. This planet was meant to be vibrant and alive, but stank of rotten fruit.

He remembered his childhood, eighty-five years ago. He'd been in the plantations of the Mare Sirenum and had become lost among the withered bushes, yet another failed attempt by the farmers to grow food in the barren Martian soil. To a child's eyes, the plantation was a secret garden, a miracle blossoming in the sands. He'd found a winter berry, a vivid orange against the ash-brown branches. He'd reached into the tangle with his claw, snipped the berry from the vine. It had been so beautiful, and looked so tasty. Xznaal took a bite from it, only to discover that inside it was black. It had putrefied inside, without leaving any external sign. He had swallowed what he had bitten off, so that he would never forget that moment.

Was this planet a rotten fruit, lush from the outside, but foul and worthless within? Xznaal remembered his history.

In the Early Period, Martian cities would have smelt like this. Instead of being endlessly recycled, food waste and plant matter was left in the streets. On hot days, the streets would buzz with insects, the weak would die of diseases caught from the scraps left lying in ditches and gutters. The rubbish piled up against the bastions and glacis of every building was - and this was the image that stuck with Xznaal from that distant schoolroom - teeming with tiny worms and bacteria. No Martian day was as hot as even this Terran night, no city was ever as large as London. That smell was life, digesting the rubbish and filth of other life. What a world this was where even the night air sang with chemicals and buzzed with energy.

The platform had reached the ground. The humans were unsure how to react to him, and most contrived to both back away and lean forward. It amused him to think of their animal emotions trying to cope with something entirely beyond their comprehension.

The stench. The dreadful milky stench that these humans al had. They were aware of their pungent state: they tried to disguise it with ethanol and plant extracts, but this only made the rancid smell al the more powerful. He had noticed it before when Gerayhayvun and Xztaynz had come aboard, here there were a dozens of them, al with different odours. He imagined their bodies, crawling with insects and bacteria. Xznaal was dizzy, bombarded with so much that was new. He stepped onto the green flooring material, realising at the last moment that it was plant matter, soaked with water.

'Gerayhayvun... ' he wheezed.

He was becoming adept at distinguishing between individual humans. Clearly even they had difficulty telling each other apart - they all wore slightly different arrangements of cloth over their bodies. This was an odd custom that served no defensive purpose. It must be a system that allowed easy identification, like the heraldic designs on Third Period siegewalkers. Lord Gerayhayvun's head was distinctive because it showed signs of disease - his hair was drained of colour, finer and more patchy than many of his associates. It was a symptom of extreme age, white hair, yet Gerayhayvun had lived only sixty years - Terran years, he reminded himself. The cold, sterile air of Mars had its advantages, then: what remained of Martian life wouldn't burn itself away, or rot from infections and plagues.

Xznaal reeled.

'Lord Xznaal,' Gerayhayvun exclaimed. The human lord and two colleagues rushed forwards to keep Xznaal upright, clasping his shell with their vestigial, quadfurcated claws. Despite the greater gravity of their home world, their bodies were frail, but the heat where they laid their hands stung him, forcing him to steel himself. He had been here a full Earth day, and grown almost used to weighing three times more than was normal, but combined with the temperature and the smell and the air like soup, it was al too much.

'Inside the Tower you wil find the conditions more suitable,' Gerayhayvun said.

Xznaal nodded groggily, and began stepping forwards, his feet dragging against the turf.

'Killing life,' he grunted, his head lolling.

'It's only grass,' Gerayhayvun explained. 'Plenty of that here.'

The humans were relaxing as he passed, clearly not seeing him as a threat. Many were making gurgling noises.

'A drunken rhinoceros,' one human muttered. More gurgling.

Ears that could pick up a whisper on the imperceptible breeze of the Martian deserts were almost deafened by the sound of human laughter. He snapped his claw, and was satisfied to see some of them back off.

The human fortress was so far away. He lifted his foot and swung it down in front of him. His other foot scraped the ground. His shell was sagging, digging into the muscle clusters of his shoulder. Water fell from the sky - tiny droplets pattering against his carapace.

77

Some of the humans were rushing on ahead, opening a portal for him. Three humans walked in front of him, bearing swords. Those that weren't laughing at him seemed genuinely concerned. He half-stumbled over the threshold, welcoming the fresh air inside. The humans in here wore more cloth, and had covered their claws. Was their clothing designed to raise their temperature even further? The thought almost made him pass out.

But he was inside now. The air was thick and cool, like the blood of an enemy.

'Is this more suitable?' Gerayhayvun asked him, clearly agitated.

'Yess,' he barked. He could feel his strength returning, his congestion clearing a little. The humans were beginning to follow him in, and they gave him a wide berth. Their respect for him was returning, without the need for him to enforce it. They were climbing tiny steps.

'Where are we going?'

'The Chapel of St John the Evangelist. Not far now. Wil you be able to speak to them?'

'Ssoon,' Xznaal whispered.

'You will only need to say a few words.'

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The Brigadier checked his watch.

'She's not coming,' he told the Doctor gently.

'No.' The Doctor had been staring into the fire for the last half-hour, and had hardly said a word. He seemed tired, weary - not sleepy, like Benny, who dozed quietly in his lap with two mugs of cocoa and just as much vodka inside her. The alcohol had come from her "private reserve" up in her bedroom. The Brigadier wondered how long the Doctor had owned this house - he'd never referred to it during the seventies, but he often disappeared for days at a time in Bessie. Perhaps he had been here.

'If you need some shut-eye, Doctor, I can keep watch.'

The Doctor shook his head, smiling. The Brigadier had seen the Doctor sleep from time to time over the years, but he remembered those long vigils in the UNIT labs where the Doctor would spend thirty, forty, fifty hours at work, without even a tea-break, discovering the cure for a plague or assembling some magical gadget from household junk. When they'd been setting up his lab, the works department had put a little bunk in the corner. The very next day it had been piled high with computer parts and components from a car engine.

'We've been here before, Doctor. The aliens have landed, they've tried to destroy the world and we beat them. The only difference is, back when I was in charge, we always managed to keep it a secret.'

'And they didn't even make you a general,' the Doctor chuckled.

Lethbridge-Stewart looked down at his half-full glass of vodka. Mrs Summerfield might be able to knock back her drink, but he was taking it easier these days. 'No. Office politics.'

The Doctor was watching him. 'General William Lethbridge-Stewart came down from Scotland with King James.'

The Brigadier perked up a little. 'Yes, yes, I know. Have you met him on your travels?'

The Doctor shook his head.

'They arrived at London in 1603 to a glorious parade, a magnificent spectacle, according to family legend. It was seen as the glorious union of the English and Scottish crowns. James the Sixth of Scotland would become James the First of the United Kingdom. The English aristocracy fell over themselves to greet their new master. And do you know what? When King James spoke, not a single one of them could

understand his accent. For the first few months he needed a translator.' The Doctor laughed out loud, and Alistair found himself chortling.

'There was a General Lethbridge-Stewart at Naseby and at Waterloo. My father died in the Sahara, fighting Mussolini alongside Montgomery. A dozen generations of fighting men.'

‘And there wil be a dozen more,' the Doctor said.

Alistair's expression flickered. 'No, I don't think so. My daughter may be talking to me now, but I don't think she'll ever let Gordy join up.' He paused, looking down at Bernice, so peaceful in sleep. 'Thank God.'

The Doctor didn't say anything.

Alistair sighed. 'The world has changed. My father could remember reading about the Wright Brothers' first flight. I remember him bringing home a piece of Bakelite to show us. It was like moonrock. You know what Bakelite is, don't you?'

'Plastic,' the Doctor replied.

The Brigadier nodded. 'Forty years ago, I was a lieutenant in Africa. I got lost in the jungle, and stumbled across a Themne village called Rokoye where most people had never seen a white man before. For a while I lived there, in a place where half of the women died in childbirth and where you were considered a traveller if you walked for more than a day. They were good people, but were probably less advanced than the Britons when Julius Caesar invaded.' He paused. 'It's a long time since I thought about my time there. There are great chunks of my life that I don't - or can't - talk about. I've made a career from keeping a lid on my memories.'

The Doctor's eyes narrowed. 'So what made you think of Sierra Leone now?'

'Because last week I watched the Channel Four News and learnt that the Themne are wiping out their neighbours with attack helicopters over oil rights.'

'You blame yourself for that?'

The Brigadier looked into the fire. 'I don't know. When I was back in Britain, I used to read about all those groups who were trying to free Nelson Mandela and think that they were wrong, that he was a

communist terrorist and that the world would be a better place without people like him running around. Apartheid was wrong, I knew that, but that didn't make everyone who opposed it right.' He hesitated before changing the subject. 'Do you remember Crichton?'

'Colonel Crichton, the head of UNIT in the eighties. I only met him a couple of times.' The Doctor's expression remained neutral, but Alistair sensed disapproval in his voice.

The Brigadier nodded. 'He was promoted to general two years ago, after a fracas involving the Yeti. It was only the third time he'd led men into battle against extraterrestrial forces. They promoted him, but they never promoted me.'

He paused for a moment before knocking back the vodka.

The doorbel rang, startling them both.

They looked at each other sheepishly - both thinking about the hordes of monsters they'd fought over the decades, only to end up here being frightened of doorbells.

Lethbridge-Stewart had already reached for his gun. The Doctor shook his head. 'Ice Warriors don't knock,' he assured his friend.

The Brigadier nodded, but kept the pistol close to him. 'I'm coming with you.'

The Doctor extricated himself from the dozing Benny and made his way through to the hal . The Brigadier stayed behind him, far enough back to get a clear shot if that proved necessary.

The Doctor reached the front door. He glanced back at the Brigadier, who was standing by the grandfather clock. It provided him with partial cover, and with something to conceal his gun behind.

The door opened to reveal a pretty blonde thing standing on the step. She didn't have a hair out of place, she wore a haute-couture dress and a gold necklace that would break the bank for most people. A hairy chap behind her looked a little more nervous. He was carrying a big bag with a shoulder strap - it was almost certainly just his camera equipment, but there was room in there to stow a bazooka.

'Miss Waugh,' the Doctor beamed, 'good of you to join us.'

She smiled, kissing the Doctor on the cheek. 'I'm sorry we're late. The motorway was at a standstill - police roadblocks at every junction. It was causing tailback, fender-benders, chaos. Who's this?' she asked, looking over at him.

The Brigadier introduced himself, but didn't shake her hand.

'UNIT... ' Miss Waugh breathed. 'You were the head of UNIT in this country during the seventies.'

'That's meant to be classified,' Lethbridge-Stewart joked. Twenty years ago, only a handful of people had known that information, but nowadays it was an open secret. His picture had appeared dozens of times over the years in various newspapers and books.

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The Doctor hurriedly introduced the woman and her cameraman, Alan, to him. The Brigadier watched them carefully, and asked them to leave the camera bag and Eve's mobile phone in the hall. They agreed, and the Doctor led them through into one of the dining rooms, so as not to disturb Ms Summerfield.

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The humans were taking their places around tables. They were divided into groups of six or seven. Xznaal was sitting in a chair designed for a human.

Xztaynz was talking to Gerayhayvun. They were speaking quietly, but Xznaal could hear them. 'You can't be going through with this?'

'Of course I am.'

'That is not the Archbishop of Canterbury.' Xztaynz waved a withered claw at a human animal in flowing purple robes, who was muttering the words of some pagan ceremony.

'Oh, he's near enough,' Gerayhayvun said breezily.

A hundred human eyes were watching Xznaal, with a mixture of curiosity and respect. The tables were piled high with food - steaming animal carcasses, vegetables, fruit.

Xznaal had read an oath, and this had been the cause of some consternation in the crowd. Now the purple robed human came

forwards with a gold implement. He was a priest of some kind.

'If you could move onto King Edward's chair,' he prompted, indicating the adjacent seat.

'Why?'

'Because that is how the ceremony goes.'

Xznaal grunted and complied.

Once he was settled, the priest held out a gold implement and lunged at Xznaal with it. The Martian caught the priest's wrist, making the human scream.

'What iss thiss?' he demanded.

The priest was in some pain, indicating that human nervous development had reached a more highly-evolved state than Xznaal had thought. 'It i-is the Anointing Spoon, your, er, your majesty,' the human bleated.

'I ssee. Explain the ritualss ass you perform them.'

'As you wish. The holy oil has been stored in the Ampul a, now it has been transferred to the Anointing Spoon. I dab oil onto your er, hands, your breast and the crown of your head. This is the most sacred part of the ceremony.

It was first performed in 785 on Egfrith, King of Merc- '

'Enough explanation. Continue.'

The priest ushered in a couple of human helpers. 'Now the investment of the royal robes and other ornaments, each of which symbolises a part of your kingdom, physical and spiritual.'

'I ssee. You want me to wear thesse garmentss?'

The priest held out a white, sleeveless piece of cloth. 'This is the Colobium Sindonis, this,' he lifted up a thick gold cloak with crimson lining, 'is the Supertunica, or the Dalmatic - '

Xznaal struggled into them, ripping the first. The heavy cloak was enough to keep him pinned down on the throne.

He waved his claw to indicate that he was still conscious.

A human touched Xznaal's feet with tiny gold spikes.

'You are now a knight of the realm, Sir Xznaal,' the priest explained. 'A necessary condition for your coronation.

Now, if you could take the Sword of Offering - ' Xznaal took it in a single claw and examined it. Unlike the ceremonial swords of Mars it had clearly never been used in combat, but it was a great deal more ornate - the hilt and scabbard glittered with gemstones: diamonds, rubies, sapphires and emeralds. Unsheathing the blade, Xznaal was pleased to see that the sword was of the finest steel.

'With this sword do justice,' the priest intoned, 'stop the growth of iniquity, protect the Holy Church of God, punish and reform what is amiss and confirm what is in good order and so faithfully serve our Lord Jesus Christ in this life, that you may reign forever with him in the life which is to come.'

'I am to sshare my throne with this Jessuss Chrisst?' Xznaal bellowed. 'I will accept no joint ssovereignty. Bring thiss Chrisst here. I challenge him to a duel, with weaponss of hiss choossing.'

Gerayhayvun hurried forwards. 'No, no, my Lord - your majesty. I'll explain afterwards.'

Xznaal nodded, glaring. 'You will do that.'

The ceremony proceeded. The sword was removed and laid on a flat table. The priest explained what was happening. 'The earl who is the greatest of those present, in this case Lord Greyhaven, will carry the sword naked before the king.' He turned to the humans. 'The price of the sword belongs to the Altar,' he declared. He turned back to Xznaal. 'The peer who carries the Sword of State now exchanges it for the sword you were bearing just then, the Jewel ed Sword for one hundred shillings.' Greyhaven placed a bag of coins on the table and handed over a larger sword. The human required two hands to lift it.

'Thiss ceremony iss ludicrouss. Iss thiss really how it iss done?'

'It is, and I agree,' Gerayhayvun called over. 'But it is necessary.'

Xznaal turned back to the priest. 'The hilt of that ssword hass beasstss carved upon it,' he observed. 'Explain.'

'They are the lion and the unicorn, your majesty. Symbols of this land.'

'Undersstood.' Xznaal was beginning to feel more groggy.

'These are the Armills, symbolising sincerity and wisdom.' Two gold bracelets bearing stylised flower designs.

Next, the priest handed a gold globe the size of an impact grenade. 'Now, receive this Orb, set under the Cross and remember that the whole world is subject to the Power and Empire of Christ our Redeemer.'

Xznaal snorted, causing the priest to step back. 'Er, the Coronation ring is now placed on the fourth finger of the right hand and, er... ' He waved the ring feebly around Xznaal's claw.

'Leave it,' Gerayhayvun snapped. 'We'l worry about that later. Just give him the sceptres and get on with it.' Two gold rods were handed over - one apparently symbolised "Kingly power and justice", the other was the "rod of equity and mercy".

The priest said some prayer, and then held up a crown. It was gold, with the cross and fleur-de-lys motifs that appeared on many of the artefacts.

'This is St Edward's crown, your majesty. It dates back to the time of Edward the Confessor, as far as we can tell.

When I place this upon your head, you will be the rightful King of England.'

Xznaal hissed his pleasure. As the crown was lowered, the first few voices were raised. Nervous at first, the human crowd gradually got into the spirit of the occasion.

'God save the King!'

'God save the King!'

'God save the King!'

Trumpets and cannons were sounding in salute. Xznaal hoped that his gunnery crew didn't think of it as an attack.

'The moment that you sit on that throne, your majesty, you wil take possession of the kingdom,' Gerayhayvun informed him over the clamour.

Xznaal moved eagerly over to the next chair, throwing himself down. It didn’t even creak under his weight.

'All hail King Xznaal the First,' Gerayhayvun said quietly.

Xznaal couldn't stand, not weighed down by robes and baubles. The power of his voice was undiminished, though, and he roared for attention. The crowd fell silent. He had prepared the speech that fol owed, perhaps spending more time on it than was appropriate when addressing beasts. 'Martian legendss sspoke of great hallss full of treassure where the greatesst warriorss went to when they died.' He said. The humans strained to hear him. 'Truly thiss iss ssuch a place.'

The humans slapped their paws together, apparently a sign of appreciation. Xznaal let the noise die down and then continued. 'On Marss, water is rare, frozen solid. Here it fallss from the ssky. If you humanss were to arrive on a planet where it rained gold, you might be able to imagine your delight. But could you desscribe your feelingss

- could a mammal even experience the intenssity of emotion - if the native lifeform offered no ressisstance and told you that poolss of gold covered two-thirdss of the world'ss ssurface, that they had a word for ssuch a phenomenon, "ssea"? Your world is unlike ourss. The land and the ssky and the ssea crawl with life and mineral wealth.'

A human was talking to Gerayhayvun, bending over him, talking quietly into his ear. Apparently the other humans couldn't hear the conversation, but Xznaal caught every word. It came as no surprise, then, when Gerayhayvun tried to get his attention. Xznaal finished quickly.

'Everything here iss in ssuch abundance. Even the horizon is further away. I look forward to ruling you, my ssubjectss. Thank you for your human hosspitality.'

Once they were sure that Xznaal had finished, the guests slapped their claws together. Gerayhayvun leant across to him.

'My office has just taken a call from a friend of mine. She has found the Doctor. He's about a hundred miles from here, the police are on their way.'

Xznaal exhaled, pulling himself upright. 'Do you not want to be in on the kil ?' he asked.

'It would be nice to see the grin wiped off the Doctor's face,' Xztaynz offered.

Xznaal hissed his satisfaction.

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All four of them sat around a big oak dining table. There was an uncomfortable silence for a moment.

The Doctor took a deep breath. 'The Ice Warriors did not come here to avenge the memory of some dead clan chief, that was simply -'

'Wait a minute,' Eve objected. 'Ice Warriors?'

'The native race of the planet Mars,' the Doctor explained rapidly, 'The name is a rough translation of their own term for themselves, although literally it's nearer "Polar Bears". In the future, some people prefer to cal them

"Indigenous Martians", but that's an ugly phrase coined in a rather ugly period of colonial expansion.'

'Like "Red Indians" and "Native Americans",' Alan said suddenly. 'Even the politically correct term imposes European cultural assumptions.' He looked over at Eve, pleased with his analysis. It was the first thing he'd said.

'Quite,' the Doctor continued. 'Now, the Ice Warriors claim to have come here to punish humanity for the crime of tomb robbery. This only provided the pre-text for the invasion, and in fact the Martian war rocket was waiting in a powered orbit above the dark side of Earth's moon.'

Eve was still waving at him to slow down. 'How do you know all this?'

'Don't worry about that for the moment. Let me just explain what's happening. A number of people here in the United Kingdom have been involved in a conspiracy with the Martians.'

'Like who?' Eve said scornfully.

'Who has benefited most in the last twenty-four hours?' Lethbridge-Stewart asked them.

'Greyhaven?' Alan suggested.

'Precisely,' the Doctor said triumphantly.

Eve was shaking her head. 'Edward's not in league with the Martians. He brokered peace.'

'You know him?' the Brigadier asked.

Eve nodded, clearly preoccupied with something. 'I was researching a profile of him, and I'd met him to arrange an interview.' She paused. 'If he is working with the Martians, then he has good reasons.'

The Doctor looked her straight in the eye. 'I can't be sure what his motives are. Perhaps they are noble, perhaps he thinks that what he has done will benefit the British people. He wants to make his country great again, he wants to be its leader. What I do know is that to achieve his aims he has al ied himself with a warlike alien power and overthrown the elected government of this country.'

It was the Brigadier's turn to speak. ‘He's almost certainly implicated in the assassination of the Prime Minister.

We've uncovered evidence of a conspiracy dating back over twenty years. Greyhaven has been using his influence all that time, collecting allies and equipment.'

'You make him sound like a Bond villain,' Eve objected.

The Doctor gestured helplessly. 'Greyhaven isn't relevant, anyway. Xznaal wil use him as long as he's a good little puppet, and kill him the moment he steps out of line. Greyhaven has given them a foothold, and now he's served his purpose. At the moment, we aren't sure what the Martians are planning, but whatever they are going to do, they won't be stopping at the English Channel. The Martians want the Earth, and they'l kill the entire human race if they have to.'

Alan looked puzzled. ‘If the Martians can build spaceships and they’re hostile, then why haven’t they tried to invade Earth before?’

The Doctor peered up at the two Americans through his fringe. ‘Believe me, they tried.’

'Do you have any evidence for any of what you are saying?' It was clear that Eve knew that the Doctor was tel ing the truth, but that she found it almost impossible to cope with what he was saying.

The Brigadier knew as wel as anyone what Eve must be feeling at the

moment. Nearly a quarter of a century ago, back when he was a Colonel, he'd met the Doctor for the first time. In less than an hour everything that Lethbridge-Stewart knew to be true, his entire world-view, had been challenged. Friends were enemies, there were monsters, demons and things that existed out in space that man couldn't comprehend. From that moment until his retirement, Lethbridge-Stewart only knew two things for certain: the world depended on him, and he could trust the Doctor.

'No,' the Brigadier said, 'We have no proof. That's why we cal ed you here. Together we can travel the country and collect the evidence.'

'You can send it back to America, show the world what is happening here,' the Doctor said, a gleam in his eye.

Eve was defensive. 'What is happening is that Britain has formed a mutually beneficial alliance with an advanced alien race. I'm telling you that if that ship had appeared over Washington, the President would have done just the same.'

'This isn't the bold new future, it's chaos,' the Doctor shouted.

Lethbridge-Stewart tried to remain calm. 'I used to work with the United Nations, as you know. I still attend reunions, I talk to this generation of soldiers. Have you ever talked to anyone who was a peacekeeper in the former Yugoslavia? Do you know what frightened them most? It wasn't the bombing, the snipers, the shelling or the piles of dead children. It was the fact that they were patrolling towns that looked like English towns.'

The Doctor was staring into the distance, as though he was looking into the thoughts of each and every soldier.

'They walked through the rows of semi-detached houses, all the burnt-out Volvos and petrol stations and primary schools, and they saw how fragile it al was. Yugoslavia used to be where they went for their holidays, but only six months later there were minefields on the beaches, and blood down the white concrete walls of al those big seafront hotels.'

'The Martians are here,' Eve insisted, 'But nothing else has changed. The Archers is still on twice a day, the milkman still brings you bottles of milk, the BBC is still funded by the licence fee. People are quite capable of turning Britain into Bosnia without any help from aliens.'

The Doctor was trying to communicate his urgency to her, while also remaining patient. 'It's calm in London. Too calm. The streets are deserted, because no-one dares to come out. But have you noticed how the television and radio is keeping very quiet about the rest of the country? From what we can gather, whole regiments and police forces are refusing to co-operate with the Provisional Government. It doesn't matter - there are quite enough who will do the Government's work for them. In a week's time, if we don't stop it, this country will have slid into chaos and civil war.'

Eve was shaking her head again. 'Look, some people find it difficult to deal with the Martians. I'm freaked out, and it isn't even my country. But they aren't an army of occupation - they haven't left their ship yet. In a week's time people wil be used to having the Martians around. Edward says that they are here in peace, and there's proof of that: if the Martians were going to wipe us out, they would have done it by now.'

'Listen to what you are saying,' the Doctor insisted. 'The only reason the Ice Warriors haven't wiped us out is because it suits their purposes not to. If things don't go their way, they'l destroy London, then Birmingham, Manchester, Bristol, Edinburgh - '

She glanced at her watch. 'You don't know that.'

'Wait a moment,' Lethbridge-Stewart said, 'Are we keeping you?'

'I'm sorry?'

'Why did you look at your watch just then?'

'I... '

Lethbridge-Stewart levelled his gun at her. 'Doctor – it’s a trap!'

Chapter Eleven

That Which Does Not Kill Us...

Staines tried to adjust the headgear that Xznaal had given him, but however much he twisted, it was still uncomfortable. It was like a smoke hood, but apparently it was an "automatic gill" that allowed humans to breathe the Martian atmosphere. Teddy was perfectly at home in his own hood, and didn't seem worried by the intense cold that had begun to nibble at their feet.

They had travelled up to the Martian ship, but this time they had ventured far further than just a reception chamber.

Nothing in the Martian ship could be classed as 'small', but this was certainly cramped compared with the vast deserted corridors and echoing hangar-like chambers they had walked through to reach it. It was almost boxy, in fact.

'The C Cube,' Xznaal said. In his own atmosphere, his voice was perfectly normal, there wasn't any of that hissing and grunting.

'The what?' Staines asked, trying to sound intelligent.

'Command, control, communications,' Greyhaven explained patiently, 'the three things an army needs on the battlefield.'

Xznaal indicated his pleasure. 'From this room, I can conduct a campaign.' His claw rammed against a control.

The walls lit up with charts, maps, aerial photographs.

'We will be in Adisham in two and a half minutes.'

'We're moving?' Greyhaven was surprised. Staines was too, of course, but that almost went without saying. To see Teddy disconcerted was a rare thing indeed.

Xznaal hissed a laugh, and an image globe lit up in front of them. It showed the Kent countryside hurtling along underneath them. Staines steadied himself.

Xznaal punched another control. The image changed, showing what looked like an aircraft hangar. There were some odd-looking vehicles in the background: some looked like giant desk lamps, some like great

camera tripods.

What really grabbed Staines' attention were the pair of Martians in the foreground, both of whom were assembling something from tubes of metal and thick, canvas-like material.

'It looks like they're putting up a tent,' Staines declared.

'Shut up, Home Secretary,' Greyhaven ordered.

But to his satisfaction, Staines saw that he was nearly right. As they completed the task with practised claws, he saw that they were assembling -

'Hang gliders?'

'That is right,' Xznaal said.

Greyhaven was a little taken aback at first. Staines watched the Acting-Prime Minister as he peered at the globe. 'I suppose that the technology is useful. Easily stored, no fuel requirement, radar-invisible, silent.'

The Martian pilots were strapping themselves into their harnesses.

'Lord Xznaal,' Staines began hesitantly, 'you seemed... uncomfortable at the Tower. Won't your men find it too hot for combat?'

'They will not be at full strength, but our scientists have increased the dosage of intravenous coolant. Their strength and constitution is still far greater than a mere human or Gallifreyan. We are here.'

'Why are you only sending two warriors?'

'Why waste more resources on such a simple matter?'

Xznaal touched another switch. At some unseen signal, both pilots began running along the hangar. The back wall opened as they arrived and they leapt into the darkness.

***

Benny half-filled the kettle and took it back over to the power point. The Doctor and the Brigadier were in one of the other rooms, and by the sound of it, Eve had finally turned up. Benny was not a vain woman, but out of basic courtesy she couldn't face visitors until she was a little better-presented. Benny flicked on the kettle and searched

for the coffee jar, wondering when she'd reached the age when one vodka gave her a hangover.

The Ice Warrior on the patio suddenly seemed more important, somehow. He turned to face her.

'Doctor!' she screamed, diving behind the sink.

The kitchen door pulsed and shattered, showering her with splinters of wood and shards of glass. The Ice Warrior was fumbling with the remains of the door frame, trying to get himself into the house.

Benny yanked the kettle off the counter, pulled the lid off and hurled the contents at the intruder's face.

It would have been enough to leave a human disfigured, probably blinded. The effect on a Martian was even more dramatic. It splashed across the warrior's forehead, steaming rivulets running down the ridges and grooves of his domed helmet. Water dripped over his chin and down the chinks in his neck.

The Martian screamed a terrible scream, massive lungs expelling every ounce of breath over jagged teeth. He sank to the floor, his claws flailing, unable to reach where the boiling water had hit him.

Benny watched him, not out of any sadistic desire, just the opposite. She hadn't killed him. Martians were stronger than that, but that just meant that his agony wouldn't be over for a very long time.

A claw flapped to the floor, shaking the room. Benny was about to move to help him, when he began hauling himself up, straightening his thick legs.

Benny realised that she hadn't killed him, she'd only made him angry.

She spun on her heels and fled into the house, hoping to get to another exit.

It was around then that she heard the front door being wrenched off its hinges.

The image was infrared. Five bright light sources were scattered at various points in the house, al of them moving at great speed. Two dimmer shapes were lumbering inevitably towards them.

'Wait!' Greyhaven called. 'Do they have orders not to attack Eve and her friend?'

Xznaal grunted. 'They have.'

'And can they distinguish between individual humans, at night, in combat conditions?'

Xznaal chuckled. 'We shall see, won't we?'

***

The Doctor and Brigadier were almost at the front door when the Ice Warrior came crashing through it. It moved slowly, deliberately, breaking down the wooden panels with slicing claw-blows.

The Doctor stepped forwards, his arms held out. 'I only wish to talk,' he said softly.

The Ice Warrior lunged for him. The Doctor side-stepped, and flicked the light switch. The Martian reeled, dazzled by the 60 watt bulb.

The Brigadier had time to aim and fire twice before it had even reacted. Both shots glanced harmlessly off its shoulder blade.

'Why did I know that was going to happen?' the Brigadier asked wearily.

The Doctor grabbed his sleeve. 'Come on! We have to find Bernice.'

They ran back through the drawing room, turning on every light they could find a switch for. The Martian charged after them like a bull elephant. There was no sign of Eve or Alan. 'We almost had them convinced,' the Doctor shouted after the Brigadier.

'That's as may be, Doctor,' the Brigadier panted, 'But she's also the woman who betrayed us.'

They reached the French windows, opened them and ran out.

Only then did they see the Martian ship hovering above them.

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'You have them in your sights,' Xztaynz exclaimed. 'Fire that ray thing of yours.'

'No! It might be Eve.' Gerayhayvun shouted.

In infra-red the humans were bril iant white against the dark background of the foliage.

Xznaal turned to them both. 'To use the sonic cannon would be most unsporting.' He pointed a claw at the house, which showed the dimmer shape of the warrior moving relentlessly towards them. 'Besides, my warrior has found them.'

Xztaynz was peering at another part of the display. ‘Your other chap has someone else cornered.’

***

The wall in front of Benny pulsed and the plaster and picture frames shattered and showered to the floor. She dived left and began leaping up the stairs. The steps creaked underneath her feet as she pounded up them.

The Martian below her was still groaning in pain. He lashed his claw, knocking out the banisters and almost taking off her feet. She was more nimble than the warrior, but he was quite capable of climbing stairs. Sure enough, he began plodding up after her.

She was gaining valuable time, but he was going to be able to corner her in the end. If they had waited a couple of years there would be no problem - Ace had spent a lot of time here in the early twenty-first century. Her bedroom combined the ambience of a student room with the sheer practicality of the Royal Armouries, filled as it was with posters of pop bands and nasty-looking military hardware. There would be all sorts of big guns Benny could have used. Ten years before all that, and the room-that-would-be-Ace's contained nothing but a wardrobe full of fur coats and the most dangerous thing in there was the dead bluebottle on the window sill.

Benny kept running upstairs, hoping to think of a plan before she ran out of floors.

***

The Ice Warrior was advancing across the patio towards them, pushing aside the garden furniture. It moved around the pool of light from the kitchen window. Its eyes burned red in the shadows. The Brigadier and the Doctor backed away from it. Every so often, Lethbridge-Stewart would fire off a shot at it, in the vain hope of

slowing it down or hitting a vital spot. The Martian spacecraft hovered over them like a vulture, its gunports gaping open.

The Brigadier looked across to the Doctor for guidance. His friend was playing around with the sonic screwdriver.

'I thought that thing was a tool, not a weapon?'

The Doctor looked up. 'If you'd ever been hit over the head with a wrench, you'd know that the one can often be the other.'

He held the screwdriver aloft.

'Halt!' he ordered the Ice Warrior. To the Brigadier's amazement it did. A moment later he realised why: there was a gun of some sort on its wrist and now, for the first time, it had a clear line of sight.

'Listen to me,' the Doctor insisted, squeezing the sonic screwdriver. An ultrasonic whine filled the air. 'Your weapon fires waves of sonic energy. This device works on the same principle. Not only will it counteract your shots, it will return them to their source. You.'

The Ice Warrior moved its arm a little, adjusting its aim.

'If you fire that weapon the only thing you'l destroy is yourself,' the Doctor warned.

The Martian must have heard him, but it gave no indication that it had done so. Instead the tube on the Martian's wrist lit up, and the air was filled with a hissing noise like air escaping from a burst tyre.

For a moment nothing happened.

Then the Martian contorted as if it was its own reflection in a fairground mirror. It tried to grab its head, but couldn't control its limbs. Final y there was a great crack, and the Martian's shell burst open in a single line from shoulder to pelvis. It fell to the floor, al the light gone from its eyes. Martian blood and tissue was gushing from the wound.

'Wel done, Doctor!' the Brigadier congratulated him. 'Now we can rescue Bernice.'

The Doctor nodded, horrified by what he had done. 'I can't guarantee that the power supply will deflect another blast,' he said absent-

mindedly.

'Still,' the Brigadier said, 'it wil give the gunners up in that ship pause for thought before they loose off any shots.'

***

There was silence in the C Cube.

'What happened?' Greyhaven asked.

'The Time Lord is operating a sonic jamming field. Our energy weapons will be reflected if we use them.'

'And one of your warriors has just been killed?' Staines whimpered.

'Yes. The Doctor wil die for that action.'

***

Benny had ended up in her room, right at the top of the house. There was nothing up here but memories and alcohol.

She closed the door, and tiptoed across the room trying not to make a sound. She'd managed to lose the Ice Warrior for the moment: she could hear him crashing around on the floor below, looking for her in the bathroom. It wouldn't take him long to work out where she had gone.

The attic room. "The honeymoon suite". She and Jason had taken this room, made it their own on the few times they'd stayed here. The Doctor had left them alone as she and her husband moved the stuff up here from her old room on the floor below.

She picked up the box of matches sitting on the little fireplace and remembered a dozen mornings squatting by the fire with a match trying to get the damn strips of newspaper in the hearth to light. Meanwhile Jason lay under the duvet pretending to be asleep while he was watching her out the corner of his eye. She'd light the fire, then scurry back to the bed and he'd pul the duvet open and let her in.

And now the room was empty. Just her, a crate of vodka and a bed that was too big for one person.

The Ice Warrior was coming up the short flight of stairs.

Benny pulled one of the unopened bottles from the box and unscrewed

the top. Supermarket vodka this, nothing special. The Doctor, of course, was a bit of a connoisseur and wouldn't touch anything that didn't smell of Red Army engine oil. She wasn't fussy.

Benny just had time to take a swig as the Ice Warrior crashed through the door. He had to bend down almost to a crouch to get in, and seemed to fill the room.

She stood, a little awkwardly.

'Hello,' she said weakly, holding up a lit match. 'Beware the power of my mighty weapon. Sorry, it's the best I can do.'

Like all Martians, he was instinctively nervous around fire, but he wasn't going to stay scared for long. He had scars al along one side of his head where the water had splashed it. Nasty green weals hadn't quite finished forming.

Benny winced as her match burnt down to her finger. She dropped it and lit another.

'Look, I hate al this fighting,' she said in his native tongue. The sentiment was actually quite difficult to get across in the Martian language, their love of al things Thanatotic meant that it was pretty close to doublethink: 'good things are bad' and all that. 'Couldn't we just sit down over a bottle of voddy and talk it through?' She held up the bottle by way of demonstration.

'No,' the Martian replied. 'This must be to the death.' He used an unapologetic form.

Benny threw the bottle at him. He caught it, snapped it in half between his pincers. Almost a litre of perfectly good vodka splashed over his claw and massive forearm.

'You must die now. I wil not prolong your agony.' the warrior said. His breath wafted over her, cold as the draught under the door on a winter’s day. He was being charitable in the circumstances, considering the pain he must be in. Then again, the scars gave him something to brag about. No doubt in a couple of years there would be legends among the Argyre clan about how he'd ventured to the lair of the Summerfield, bitchqueen of Earth, a mighty twelve-armed, six-breasted harpy and how he had slain her in single unarmed combat.

'Please,' Benny pleaded, 'I don't want to kill you.'

He grunted a laugh and extended his claw, which still dripped with Smirnoff.

Benny dropped the lit match onto it and jumped past him out of the door.

His screams followed her down two flights of stairs and along the hal .

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The room at the top of the house was a giant, flaring mass.

'What's going on?' Xztaynz was shouting.

'You've lost the other one as well?' Gerayhayvun said.

'Be silent!' Xznaal ordered. 'Respect the fallen warriors.'

'They've kil ed both Martians?' Gerayhayvun said, respect in his voice.

'They have,' Xznaal confirmed. 'The Gallifreyan is a threat to our operation. He must be destroyed.'

'You must deploy more warriors,' Gerayhayvun insisted.

'And watch them die? I respect life, Lord Gerayhayvun.'

'You seemed unconcerned when it was Eve that was at risk,' the human argued.

Xznaal grabbed Gerayhayvun's neck in his claw and pulled him off the floor. The human weighed less than his arm and was easier to lift. 'Terran life,' Xznaal roared, 'is of no concern. Earth crawls with animals. Remember that, my Lord.' He dropped Gerayhayvun to the deck. 'We must use another method.' He tugged at a control. 'Vrgnur, meet me in the Dispersion Chamber. Helmsman, increase altitude to ten thousand metres.'

***

Bernice clambered over the remains of the front door.

The Doctor ran over to her and gave her a hug.

'Fire,' she cried. 'Bedroom on fire.'

The Doctor pulled back from her, and pointed up to her window. It was dark up there.

'But I... '

'The house can look after itself,' he assured her. 'Are you all right?'

She nodded. 'I kil ed him,' she sobbed.

'We had a spot of success down here, too,' the Brigadier said cheerfully. He indicated the warrior's body.

'His disruptor backfired,' Bernice shuddered, her hand over her mouth.

'We can fight the Martians, but not the police,' Lethbridge-Stewart said. 'The warship might have got here first, but the police and army won't be far behind. Now let's get Bessie out of the garage and move out.'

***

Xznaal had been silent as he led them through the ship to the Dispersion Chamber. Even the name of the place made Staines nervous. He wondered what was going to be dispersed.

A huge hatch rumbled open. Xznaal stepped in, with Greyhaven close behind. Staines could think of nothing better to do than follow.

The room was large, lined with vast metal drums and cylinders. They looked like grain silos, or huge gas bottles.

A hatch at the other end of the room rattled open. Another Martian stomped in, a metal tube the size of a pillar box cradled in its arms. Staines realised that this was only the second Martian he had seen up close. Although an impressive sight, it was slightly smaller and slimmer than Xznaal. Its shel was a lighter shade of green.

'This is my scientist, Vrgnur,' Xznaal barked.

Vrgnur laid the tube on the deck and beat his claw against his chest - a salute, rather like the ancient Roman style.

That formality completed, the Martian began connecting the metal cylinder up to a network of thick plastic tubes.

Greyhaven leant towards the cylinder.

'What is this?' he asked.

'See for yourself.'

Vrgnur pulled at a hatch about halfway along the tube, which slid open. Greyhaven smiled at Staines and stepped up to the cylinder.

He peered in.

'Nothing,' he informed Staines.

He took another look.

A red claw slammed against the glass. Involuntarily, he started and fell back.

Xznaal caught him and gave a low, throaty chuckle.

There was a haze hovering in the middle of the tube. It looked like a column of steam from a kettle, but was the colour of rosé wine.

'What is it?' Staines asked, genuinely interested.

Xznaal was also regarding the phenomenon with fascination. 'We call it the Red Death. It is an assassination weapon, a sentient poison mist. In the Martian atmosphere it is invisible.'

'A cloud with a wil of its own?' Staines asked incredulously.

'If you like.'

'How does it work?' Greyhaven asked.

'A simple technique combining molecular re-engineering and artificial intelligence etherware. It has merely an animal intellect.'

'But you can program it to kil ?'

'Yes. This specimen has been programmed with the Doctor's DNA profile. Traces of his blood were discovered in the reception chamber, when he was cut by falling glass. The Red Death wil hunt him down and kill him.'

'Will it know where to look?'

Vrgnur lurched to a control panel. 'We will unleash the Death here, at an altitude of ten kilometres. The mist will disperse throughout the immediate area. When it locates the Doctor it will gather and feed. Once the Doctor is dead, the Red Death wil instantly decompose into its natural elements.'

Xznaal twisted a great wheel, and the mist hissed out of the chamber, out of the warship.

'Now we will watch and wait.'

***

Birds were falling from the sky. Owls and sparrows, gulls and thrushes. They were dropping like stones.

The Doctor stopped the car.

There was hail too, or so Benny thought at first. They she realised that the droplets were dead insects of every kind.

'Everything's dying,' the Doctor was muttering.

'It's some sort of poison gas,' Lethbridge-Stewart said, staring up into the dark sky.

Benny looked up, holding her hand up to shelter her face from the steady pelting of tiny bug carcasses. There was a storm cloud above them, growing larger with every instant.

'It's descending.'

'We can't hang around,' the Brigadier said.

The cloud was drifting over the rooftops of Adisham like thick smoke. It was almost invisible in the darkness, but in the pools of light underneath the street lamps it bil owed like volcanic ash.

'All those people,' the Doctor cried out. 'All those poor people.' He jumped from of the car and began running back down the road towards the village.

'Doctor! What are you doing?' Benny screamed.

He whirled around, now he was jogging backwards. 'I have to save them if I can. Whatever you do, don't follow me. Alistair, get Bernice to safety.'

'Doctor!' Benny screamed, 'Come back! You'll be killed.'

'Goodbye!' the Doctor called.

The Brigadier grabbed her arm, prevented her from leaving the car. 'You heard what he said.'

'Do you agree with him?'

'No,' he admitted grimly as he slid across to the driver's seat. 'But I trust him. Come on!'

As Bessie sped away up the hill, Benny turned back, watching the Doctor recede into the distance. The thick cloud was engulfing the buildings now. The screaming had started.

***

'Vrgnur, report!'

The scientist was hunched over his instruments. 'My Lord, the Red Death is reacting with the increased levels of oxygen and biological activity in the Terran atmosphere. It has entered a feeding frenzy and is multiplying at an astonishing rate.'

Gerayhayvun was on his feet. 'It's attacking that village. Can't you control it?' he squealed in his own language.

Xznaal narrowed his eyes. The Death was a thick fog now, bil owing down the hil side.

'It is operating on instinct, sir, I can't restrain it.'

'Show me what it sees.'

The hologlobe switched its image, showing a disjointed view of the human settlement. It was like a compound eye: hundreds of circles, each containing a different viewpoint. Every single one was filled by images of humans and their animals running in the streets, terrified. Xznaal watched as the cloud picked them off, swirling around their heads, grasping their nostrils, forcing itself into their mouths and lungs.

'This is horrible,' Xztaynz was crying.

'It is unavoidable,' Xznaal said calmly.

***

He ran down over the village green, past the Bull's Head, keeping control of his breathing. The red mist was everywhere: hanging around the police station, wafting over the cottages on Donkey Lane and around the roof of Mrs Darling's corner shop. The Doctor shooed the ducks from the duckpond as he hurried past them.

A car had smashed into a row of cottages. The Doctor ran over, but the driver had died of suffocation long before the crash. Through the windows of every cottage the Doctor could see men and women, their dead faces lit by the flickering of their television screens. Al around him he could hear the screams of men and women, the cries of children, the barking of dogs. From the direction of Pond Hil , humans were cal ing out for help, mourning their loved ones or simply cursing the thing that had brought death to their little village. The cloud was picking them off one by one, not even letting them finish their lament.

Adisham was almost silent.

What could he do?

The Doctor stood there, listening to a whole town die. He stared up at the sky, at the red fog and the dark shape of the Martian warship far above them. Tendrils of vapour curled around walls, licked around the ground, searching with bloodhound devotion. It was a sentient gas, programmed for one purpose.

Hunting him.

It was meant for him and wouldn't stop its kil ing until he was dead.

That meant that there was only one thing he could do to stop it.

***

'There's the Doctor,' Greyhaven announced, clearly affected by the carnage he was watching.

'Where?' Xznaal snapped hungrily.

Greyhaven pointed out one of the images.

The picture rippled, filling with an aerial view of the Doctor half-running, half-stumbling along a main street littered with human

corpses. He was running towards the cloud, waving his arms.

The Red Death was getting nearer and nearer.

'It's almost as though he wants to be found,' Staines observed.

Xznaal leant forward, almost dipping his head into the hologram. 'You can feel its hatred of him,' he hissed, his pincers clattering together in anticipation. 'Kill him!' he shouted, 'Kill the Doctor!'

***

He was at the corner of the main street. The red cloud was surging towards him like a tidal wave, breaking over the roof of Mrs Darling's little shop. It had gathered itself together, and now it was lit from within. Tiny lightning flashes revealed billowing crenellations and blossoming stegosaur spines built up from layer after layer of blood-red fumes.

There was a crashing from inside the building. There was someone in the shop, directly in the path of the cloud.

Some instinct within the gas knew it too. It paused and began scuttling across the roof. It had clearly decided that it could have some sport with whoever was in the building, and then be able to return to its primary target. The Doctor jogged ahead and peered in through the window.

The door was locked, but that didn't pose a barrier to someone with a sonic screwdriver. Once inside, the Doctor closed the door behind him and switched on the light.

There was a plaintive miaow from underneath a col apsed row of shelving.

The cat had probably brought the shelves down on himself - he was a heavy old thing. It was Stevie, the big white moggie that Mrs Darling had owned for as long as the Doctor could remember, which was a very long time indeed.

He was blocked in on al sides by shelves weighed down by heavy tin cans. The Doctor moved a couple of tins aside, and cleared a way through. Stevie looked dopily up at him, as though he'd been planning to bury himself alive and wouldn't tolerate such interference in his sleep patterns.

The fog was thickening outside, enveloping the building. The Doctor didn't have long.

He prompted Stevie, trying to tempt him out of the hole by smacking his lips and rubbing his fingers together. He'd never worked out why, but universally cats seemed to recognise that as meaning "come here". The cat struggled to comply, but still couldn't move. The Doctor tried to ease the shelving unit back, but it was wedged against the wall.

A sickly red mist crept past the shop window, pausing there.

If there was a chance that the Doctor could save a life, then he would always try.

He had to work around the cat, to dislodge one shelf rather than the whole unit. He began removing tins.

The Doctor could end wars, repel invasions, track the villain to his lair, expose master plans and wipe out evil across the universe of time and space, he could do all that before breakfast.

A tendril of cloud slapped against the window pane with surprising strength, but not enough to crack the glass.

The cat looked up, its eyes wide, its ears swept back. "Get out," it was warning him, "Save yourself".

But if the Doctor couldn't use his unique abilities and special powers to save the life of one little cat, then what was the point of having them?

The cat looked at him, cocking his head to one side, acknowledging the Doctor's help for the first time.

'I won't leave you,' the Doctor assured him.

Because when it comes down to it, doctors save lives and any life is worth saving.

Death came drifting through the cracks in the doorframe.

The Doctor eased the shelf up, opening an escape route. Almost before he had finished, the cat had scurried away, over the counter. For an instant it paused, granting his saviour one of the rarest things in the universe: feline gratitude. And then he had gone, out through the catflap in the back door.

The Doctor grinned.

There was a crackling, popping sound like bacon under a grill.

The Doctor stood, brushing a cat hair from his frock coat.

It was forming and reforming the whole time, but there was a central mass there, a writhing, sulphurous thing with a hundred eyes, al watching him.

Tendrils of crimson vapour wafted towards him, sensing a trap.

It smelt of cigarettes, of exhaust fumes, of week-old dustbins. It smelt of decay. It smelt of Death.

The Doctor straightened, his hands behind his back.

Time Lords have many lives and that means that they die many times. That didn't mean it was ever easy.

Death moved tentatively, finding no fear from its prey. It instinctively knew that in killing him it would kill itself.

The Doctor knew now that someone else would liberate Britain from the Martians, someone else would confront the traitors, organise the rebels and destroy the monsters. He had no regrets, why would he? For twelve hundred years and in every corner of time and space he had helped others to hold back death, he'd helped them to go forward in all their beliefs. Then by their own achievements, their own heroism, their own sacrifices, his companions - his friends - had proved his actions right. He could wish for no better epitaph.

The Doctor prepared himself.

Death drew itself into a red circle around him, filling the whole of the shop, hissing all the time.

'Hello,' the Doctor said softly, holding out a paper bag. 'Would you like a jelly baby?'

It was steeling itself to pounce, savouring the moment. It began tensing panther muscles made of smoke. A carnivore mouth was forming, vaporous jaws and hazy fangs.

The Doctor smiled, and welcomed Death as it swept over him.

C

hapter Twelve

The No Doctors

Thursday, May 15th 1997

Benny stretched her arms and yawned.

When she opened her eyes, the Doctor was standing there, his umbrella in one hand, a tray full of breakfast things carefully balanced in the other. She was in her room at Allen Road, the one opposite Chris Cwej's on the first floor.

'Good morning, Benny,' he said, standing in a shaft of warm spring sunlight. 'I've brought you some strong black coffee and lightly-done toast, just how you like it. I'm afraid that Chris has taken the last of the marmalade.' His face wrinkled up. 'Are you al right?'

She shook herself. 'I've just had a dream.'

'What do you remember?' he asked, clearly curious about such a human little thing. The Doctor was the sort of person that had dream sequences instead of dreams: his subconscious continued to plot away even while he was trying to get some shut-eye. No wonder he rarely slept.

'I don't think it was anything significant. It was so vivid. You know the sort of thing? A dream that goes on for so long that when you wake up you have to spend the first few minutes working out what's real.'

He smiled. 'The sort of dream that haunts you all morning?'

'Yeah.' She sipped her coffee. 'Where's Jason?'

The Doctor frowned. 'Who?'

'My husband.'

The Doctor grinned a goofy grin. 'Ms Summerfield, you are renowned throughout the galaxy for your singular lack of interest in that sphere of human affairs.'

Benny munched on the toast. 'Lack of success, rather than interest, I

assure you. I dreamt I got married.'

'A white wedding, with guests from across time and space, all getting on perfectly wel together despite their different creeds and histories?'

'Yes,' she admitted glumly. 'Simple girlie wish-fulfilment, I suppose. There was even a unicorn there. The man I married was a bit of a rough diamond with a heart of gold and a roving eye, but he loved me and only me and I loved him back. We interrupted our honeymoon and found dad. He was running a teashop in Berkshire. I got a professorship. A real one that I earned.'

'It sounds like a nice dream,' the Doctor said wistful y, 'if a little far-fetched. I wish I had dreams like that.'

Benny hesitated, and sipped her tea. 'Well, yes and no. It all went sour after that. Roz died. I had an argument with Jason and we split up. Chris left you. Then ... wasn't this coffee a minute ago?'

'Then?' the Doctor prompted.

'Then you changed.' She looked over at the little man, frowning. 'And the government were working with the Martians and we were framed for murder and the Martians invaded and they blew up UNIT HQ and dropped a poison gas on Adisham and all the animals were dying and the people and the Brigadier was driving me away in Bessie and I couldn't stop you and you went running into the cloud and then you - '

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Extract from the memoirs of Professor Bernice Summerfield

I woke, screaming.

I was bolt upright with a rough hand over my mouth, in the darkness. Holding me down.

'Bernice,' a firm voice was saying. 'It's all right.'

I had stopped screaming, my mouth hoarse. I lay there, my heart pounding, pumping all that adrenaline around and around my body.

The rain was pattering against the corrugated iron roof of the officer's mess. It was the middle of the night.

'Are you all right?' Alistair asked me.

I slumped back. 'I've just had a dream.'

'The Doctor?'

'The Doctor.'

***

It was light just before six.

I was woken by the sound of the radio. The UNIT operators were collating information from the resistance cells, making a list of enemy positions and activity, just as they had been when I went to sleep. The toothpaste and soap were in the provisions box and I made my way outside. I didn't take my gun, and knew that would earn me a reprimand from Alistair when I got back.

I pulled the door open and stepped outside. The privates on guard duty saluted me, which I admit gave me a bit of a thril . The air was chil y and there was a haze of mist still hanging around. The ground was still damp from the overnight rain.

As you can imagine, I was at a low ebb. The Doctor had come back as someone else, and then just as I was getting used to him, he'd been taken from me, and this time he wouldn't be coming back.

This was my second morning here. It had taken us a week to edge this far around London, avoiding the main roads. We had arrived in the area yesterday afternoon, and the UNIT people had been expecting us, or Alistair at any rate. The Royalist encampment had been set up in a natural dip in the earth, a clearing surrounded by woodland deep within Windsor Forest, south of Windsor itself. In it sat a dozen tanks and as many Harrier jets, not to mention armoured cars, jeeps, trucks and motorbikes. The hardware was either tucked underneath the trees or covered in camouflaged netting. We had known where it was, but driving along the track straining to see it, the camp had been completely invisible until we were within twenty yards - by that time, a dozen snipers concealed in or among the trees could have picked us off. If that wasn't impressive enough, the base would also be virtual y invisible from the air - not that anything was flying. The Provisional Government were enforcing a strict 'no fly' rule, at the insistence of the Martians. Bambera's men didn't have to worry about satellites, either: the resistance movement's first action was to disable the surveil ance network. This had been a disconcertingly easy task, they told us,

with a little covert help from the CIA.

There were a dozen resistance bases like this. Al of them were well away from the population centres, but close to the motorway network. The military were keeping their heads down, collecting intelligence, content to stay hidden.

Despite all the soldiers and their hardware here it was a world away from the chaos of the Martian Invasion.

The "officers' mess" was an old garage on the edge of the site, at the end of a mud track, off a disused country road. A decade ago someone had used it to fix up cars, it had probably been a barn or something of the sort before then. The UNIT troops had set up temporary stalls that made the garage look like the casualty department of a hospital, but did allow some form of privacy. The other troops slept in bivouac tents. The thrusting young archaeologist in me yearned for the romance of sleeping under the stars, but secretly I was rather glad to have walls and a roof around me.

There was already a well-trodden path to the "ladies", really nothing more than a screened off section of stream with makeshift chemical toilets and shower stal s. On arrival, I'd been surprised to see how many female soldiers there were there. Including Brigadier Bambera the commanding officer, there were about twenty. The precautions in place to keep the men and women from, ahem, 'fraternising', were rather comical. The girlies had their own little area of the camp, and the men weren't al owed in there. Fascinating from an anthropological view. Bambera and I slept in the officer's mess, suitably screened off from our male colleagues. Thankfully, none of the other women were about their ablutions when I got to the stream. What little contact I had had with them had convinced me that they weren't really my kind of people.

I was right at the edge of the camp, so I had to check that there was no-one hiding beyond the perimeter. That done, I decided to wash in the stream itself. When I was sixteen, I had lived out in the woodlands beyond the walls of Spacefleet Academy. My exploits there had become legendary among the travel ers and traders of a dozen galaxies. 'See that woman at the bar?' they'd say, interrupting some vital business transaction, 'Don't talk to her, she's forever going on and on about how she lived out in the wild and how she became a bit of a guru to the other students'. 'Oh yeah,' one of their companions would invariably reply, 'Her boyfriend kept tortoises, and he had - ', ' -

freckles and a wicked laugh!' everyone would shout out in unison.

Mockery is the sincerest form of jealousy. Besides, the skills I had picked up then had come in useful time and time again. I sat on a fallen tree trunk, cupped my hands and drank a mouthful of very cold stream water. It was too cold to wash properly, so I settled for wiping my face and neck.

The echoing, rumbling noise of an aeroplane overhead broke the still of the morning. The first repat airliner of the day, taking another five hundred people back to their home country. The flights had started yesterday, all from Heathrow. It was like the Berlin Airlift in reverse, wave after wave of plane flying due south until they were over French airspace, and then off in al directions. The radio news said that there were half a mil ion people camped at the airport - they'd need a thousand jumbo jets in total. That probably wasn't far off Heathrow's normal capacity.

The other airports weren't being used to simplify the task, apparently. According to all the reports we had received not even ProvGov planes were in the air, they'd only flown once, a quick sortie over Edinburgh.

A week ago, I'd been waiting for the Brigadier on the road out of Adisham. We'd been sitting in Bessie, parked in a lay-by that overlooked the vil age and we cheered as the red poison gas dispersed. The Doctor had managed to do that within ten minutes of his arrival. All the police cars and army vans that had been sent to Adisham to track us down had ended up as disaster relief. The Martian ship vanished over the horizon, heading back to London at a speed the Brigadier found incredible. On the radio - resistance frequencies, not the BBC - we learnt that about a hundred people had died, not the couple of thousand it might have been. The village had been completely sealed off. A week later, as I washed myself in a cold stream, the village was still surrounded by a police cordon.

So, the Doctor had saved everyone in the nick of time, and any minute now he'd appear and cheerfully underplay his achievements. The Brigadier and I bored ourselves sil y recounting the number of times that had happened.

When the Doctor didn't emerge straight away, that was fine, too. The Brigadier assured me that it often looked like he'd died, but he hadn't really, it had all been a misunderstanding. Tell me about it, I'd replied. The Doctor had cheated death so often that death didn't play anymore. He was alive, and he'd catch up with us sooner or later.

We didn't believe it, even then.

As I sat in that forest, the Martians and the Provisional Government were in London, preparing the second stage of their plan.

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91

Xznaal moved slowly through the large chambers of the East Wing of the National Gallery. After a week he was almost fully acclimatised to England. He could almost feel his veins coursing with the blood coolants developed by Vrgnur. The first sunlight of the morning was creeping through the skylights.

Xztaynz was waiting for him in the green-wal ed Sackler Room, and was baring his stumpy human teeth. 'Morning good, Kingman Snal,' he began.

'Your Martian improvess, human.'

'Thankie, my liege.'

Xznaal grunted. It offended him to hear his language desecrated by a lower lifeform. The conversation would have to continue in the crude human dialect. 'The domesstic ssituation remainss volatile. Why?'

'The rabble are trying to take advantage of the new government. The riots are being orchestrated by extremists.

We'l capture the ringleaders. With your help, we've completely removed the enemy stronghold at Portsmouth. If you would authorise the use of the warship again - '

'That attack wass in retribution for the incident at Gatwick.' He paused to suck in more air. 'Our operation there wass dissrupted. One of our sshuttlecraft was desstroyed.'

Xztaynz faltered. 'Yes, I heard reports. But your crew?'

'My crew wass unharmed.' Xznaal barked. 'But al the livesstock esscaped.'

'How did it happen?'

Xznaal didn't reply. The Terran weapons were primitive, but they had penetrated the war rocket's armour. Xznaal had always known that his

ship would be unable to withstand a nuclear blast, but last night human conventional rocketry and artillery had proved a great deal more effective than Martian military intelligence had suggested. It was a worrying development, but one that only confirmed the urgency of his endeavours.

'That iss of no importance. I will not authorisse the usse of the warsship except where Martian interesstss are directly threatened.'

'But Adisham - '

'The Time Lord wass a threat to Martian operationss. Enough of thiss: what of the other human clanss?'

'The foreign situation has stabilised, as we knew it would,' Xztaynz continued. 'Very few embassies have closed, and now that the foreign nationals are beginning to return home, and it's clear that it's business as usual - '

'Enough. Lord Gerayhayvun informss me that you are an expert on human art.'

The human shifted from one foot to the other, as it was wont to. 'I know a little. The curators here will be happy to help us if my knowledge proves imperfect. This place is so much more impressive without the mob surging around it in their backpacks and T-shirts.'

Xznaal looked around at the high ceilings and long galleries. Normally this place was open to humans of al ranks.

He understood that as the British state owned the exhibits, all taxpayers had free access to view the finest Earth art acquired in a millennium of conquest and commission. A noble arrangement for such a savage race. When he returned to Argyre, Xznaal vowed to throw open his own galleries to his subjects. The first exhibition would be one of human painting, weapons, flowers and sculpture.

He turned to the canvas on his right. 'What iss thiss one?'

'The Hay Wain. By Constable.'

'I like it. It sshowss the bounty of your human flora and fauna. Have it removed and taken to my chamberss in the Tower. Thiss one iss by the ssame artisst?'

'Correct, your majesty.'

'That one too. And that big horsse.'

'The Stubbs? Yes, King Xznaal.' The Home Secretary motioned to the curator and repeated the order.

When the curator had gone, Xztaynz turned back to Xznaal. 'Your majesty, I was at Television Centre yesterday.

The documentary on Martian history is proceeding very well. The photographs you provided of the last Marshall's funeral were very powerful.'

'Yess.' They showed the funeral barge moving up the Araxes Canal into the Fields of the Dead. Every Lord was there, their armour bedecked in gold. Xznaal had stood shell to shell with even his bitterest rivals, the leaders of the clans of Thaumasia and Erythraeum, united in grief for the ruler of all their people and in support of the new Marshal , the boy-king Paxaphyr. The funeral of a Marshall was such a contrast to the normal austerity of Martian life.

'I had no idea that your civilisation was so old. Hundreds of thousands of years. It makes human history seem so insignificant.'

'Indeed,' Xznaal whispered. 'Report on the consstruction of the sspace freighterss.'

'Er, yes, that is ahead of schedule. The first shipments to Mars wil begin at the end of the month.'

'Good,' Xznaal said.

'If I might return to the subject of Martian culture. I couldn't help noting an Egyptian influence. That fascinates me.

It seems that your people and ours have encountered one another before.'

Xznaal shuffled around to face the Home Secretary. 'Egyptian?'

'An ancient Earth clan. But Egypt is a hot country, too hot for Martians, I would have thought. Luckily, we've got a lot of Egyptian pieces at the British Museum. I brought a catalogue.'

Xznaal took the document, tried to manipulate it in his claws. It slipped between his pincers and dropped to the floor. Xztaynz bent down to pick it up, holding open and in front of his eyes. Xznaal

studied the pictures. Ancient human artefacts, all bearing crude, but recognisable images.

'You worsship thesse godss?' Xznaal hissed curiously.

'Heavens no, I'm Church of England,' Xztaynz gurgled. 'No-one has worshipped this lot for thousands of years.'

92

Xznaal glared down at him. 'They will,' he ordered. 'You will insstruct your teacher casste to include religiouss insstruction in the curriculum.'

'Martian religion?'

'Reformed Martian, yess.'

Xztaynz gurgled again. 'I'm not sure the Archbishop of Canterbury would like that.' His face was contorted into a rictus.

Xznaal angled his head and exhaled. 'Then behead him and replace him with one loyal to uss. I thought you were a politician.'

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Extract from the memoirs of Professor Bernice Summerfield:

I finished my ablutions and began to trudge back up to the officer's mess. My thoughts at the time were preoccupied with how I could escape. I'd decided that my best bet was to build myself an interstellar distress beacon and signal for help. That was the current plan, the only real flaw with it being I hadn't even the slightest idea how to build an interstellar distress beacon. I knew that I wanted to try and contact my father, but wasn't sure where to start. He'd be lying low, too low for me to find on my own. Failing that, I told myself, I could stay in Windsor Forest. Why would anyone want to leave such a peaceful wood, with deer and squirrels, for motorways and town centres with a roadblock at every junction?

I slid the door of the mess open and stepped inside. Most of the soldiers were up now. One of them had made us all a mug of tea. I took mine grateful y. The two Brigadiers were checking their maps. Lethbridge-Stewart doing so while he shaved. The radio transceiver was stil on, but now it was playing the Radio Four Breakfast Programme.

The presenters' voices were unfamiliar. There had been purges at all the broadcasters and newspapers. For the most part, UNIT had used the radio only to listen to messages, they'd maintained their own radio silence for almost the whole week. We couldn't afford to draw attention to ourselves.

'Portsmouth has fallen,' Alistair announced grimly. 'In the last hour or so. The Martian ship attacked the docks, they sank every ship there. All the Royal Navy buildings were demolished with that ray thing of theirs.'

I sat down, unable to think of anything to say. There were many tiny resistance cells, but only a handful of real strongholds still stood in England: Bristol, York, Aldershot, Manchester and here in Windsor. Perhaps a couple of others. The one at Portsmouth was the best-defended. The coup leaders included senior officers of the Army and RAF, but the Royal Navy had been almost untainted. The ships around the British coast had moved in to defend Portsmouth, to maintain a foothold on British soil and to keep the supply lines open. Now Portsmouth had fal en.

'Scotland's our best hope now,' Captain Ford noted. The Provisional Government's tacticians had been most anxious to secure the capital and the further north you went, the less their grip on power. Unfortunately, that didn't rule out airstrikes and rapid deployment of men parachuting in. Or the ever-present threat that the Martian ship could up sticks and attack any city in the country within minutes.

'It's the first time they've used the Martian ship since Adisham,' I noted. 'It's been over London for the whole week, hasn't it?' I moved over to the Brigadier. He'd unfolded a big map of the South of England over Bessie's bonnet and had marked off intelligence reports in red felt-tip. He'd been careful not to note down the location of the resistance groups they knew about - a basic security measure, but not necessarily one that would have occurred to me. The resistance cells were doing a good job in tracking ProvGov troop movements, and they had an almost complete record of where the Martians were. So far, the resistance had agreed not to attack any military targets, simply to observe them.

Bambera consulted a notepad. 'Not quite, Professor. The Martian ship headed this way on Saturday - we thought it was coming for us, but it went straight past before returning to London. It was sighted over Bradford during the rioting there on Monday night. Yesterday it was tracked over Surrey. But it's never been used in combat before.'

I rubbed my forehead, already tired again only half an hour after waking up. 'The Martians probably see the riots as a spectator sport. Up there they had the best seats in the house.'

The Brigadier slammed his fist down on Bessie's bonnet. 'Damn this!' he shouted.

We stood in silence for a couple of seconds, glaring at each other.

Tactlessly, the radio continued to reel off its propaganda. ' ... Staines reiterated that the Provisional Government is offering a full amnesty for anyone leaving the rebel encampments. In the north, York is under siege. Our correspondent on the ground there observes that medieval walls won't hold back the tanks for long. Another walled city, Chester, surrendered unconditionally on Tuesday evening when an outbreak of cholera ... '

'It must be a good sign that they haven't bombed York to oblivion,' Lethbridge-Stewart said hesitantly.

'Yes,' I said, recognising that the old man was trying to stay friends with me. Tempers had become frayed quite a few times over the last couple of days. We both knew that the Provisional Government was capable of winning without firing a shot - all they had to do was cut off the water and electricity supplies, prevent any food from getting in and wait. Parts of the country that weren't resisting were finding that life was going on pretty much as normal.

That was enough of an incentive to co-operate with the new government for most people. Even the foreign travel ban wasn't being badly-received: the government had ful y compensated holidaymakers, and businesses had received various assurances. It was frustrating just sitting here, hoping that the woods around us weren't full of Government snipers.

'What are we going to do?' I asked, trying to sound constructive.

'Professor Summerfield, you will need to brief us about the Martians and their technology. We'll need to know how long we can expect to stay hidden.' Bambera said al that without even looking in my direction.

'Fine. Look, they are a civilised race. We can talk to them.'

A couple of the officers laughed, but Lethbridge-Stewart was nodding. 'You're right. But I think we should negotiate from a position of strength. Show them what we're made of.'

Any other time, I would have cracked a dark joke about spilt blood and guts, but it wasn't appropriate.

'Brigadier,' Bambera said darkly, 'we are in no position to take back London. Especially not with that Martian ship there. We should wait here until we know more. Professor Summerfield is the expert on the Martians. Let's hear what she has to say.'

I scratched my collarbone. 'Now? OK.'

The officers pulled their chairs around to face me. I smiled nervously - this wasn't quite how I had pictured my inaugural lecture as a real professor. For one thing, I'd planned to down a stiff brandy beforehand.

I began by sketching in a brief history of the Martians. Nothing too detailed, just a rough explanation of the feudal system that had kept Martian civilisation careful y balanced for the last million years.

'So the Martians have been around for more than a million years?' one of the senior RAF men interrupted. 'Surely by now they'd have evolved into superbeings or conquered the galaxy? If they had ships like that a million years ago, why didn't they conquer the Earth then, back when we were only monkeys?'

I chuckled. This was traditional y the first question a human asked in any lecture about Martian history. I'd done the same fifteenish years before. 'You're judging their civilisation in terms of your own. There's a lot to be said for a stable society rather than a progressive one. The Ancient Egyptian civilisation thrived for thousands of years without a single new invention, they hardly even improved on their existing stuff. The only thing that changed in four thousand years under the Pharaohs was the introduction of the chariot, when the Phoenicians attacked. Or was it the Assyrians? I forget.' A number of the officers were shuffling impatiently, so I shunted off that particular train of thought. 'Anyway, the Martians are exactly the same, only their stability has been forced on them by a lack of resources. Mars is in what we archaeologists call a "state of decay": they've lost advanced technological knowledge - or it sits in libraries gathering dust - because they have no use for it. What's the point of knowing how to build an atom bomb if there isn't any plutonium? Or a silicon chip if

there isn't any silicon? Or a log fire if there aren't any logs?'

There was a murmuring around the room. They seemed excited by this. I'd stolen the last bit from a textbook that wouldn't be written for four hundred years. I enjoyed appearing all-knowing, having a roomful of military men hanging on my every word. They were lucky I didn't get my spoons out and start playing them.

'So in many ways, we are at an advantage?' Bambera asked.

I nodded sagely. 'Oh yes. Humanity is in the middle of a rapid stage of technological progress. Within a hundred years, we'l have overtaken the Martians in a number of key areas.'

Another round of murmuring.

'Don't get carried away,' I warned. 'Just think how easy it would be to conquer Victorian England using Harrier jump jets and nuclear submarines.'

The officers were apprehensive again.

'The Doctor built a sonic jammer,' the Brigadier said, trying to keep the spirit of optimism stoked up. 'That reflected the Martian's energy ray back at them. I take it that we can't do that yet?'

I shrugged.

'If we had the right frequency we probably could,' one of the technicians said. 'Problem is we don't have the frequency.'

'We need to strike before they consolidate their position,' Lethbridge-Stewart said. 'They could be preparing a giant occupation fleet on Mars.'

I shook my head. 'They have the technology, but not the raw materials. That one warship represents a massive investment of time and energy - think of all that metal and fuel. There's probably a year's entire clan defence budget tied up in it. Britain found it a lot easier to build the Mars 97 than Xznaal did to build his warship.'

Lethbridge-Stewart frowned. 'So that's not the spearhead, that's the entire invasion?'

Captain Ford was nodding. 'Our intelligence suggests that the Martians are staying put. The Provisional Government is preparing

consignments of raw materials for export to Mars: steel, timber, fertiliser.' He swept his hand over the map in front of him that had al of the production sites marked off.

Lethbridge-Stewart was trying to concentrate. 'Surely they'l use Earth's resources to build more warships? I would have thought that would be logical. Only then would they send for reinforcements. So we have to strike now, before more of those things are operational.'

Bambera frowned. 'Strike where? Look, they aren't building anything at the moment. If they started, they can't build any of those things overnight, or in one place. You are right to be concerned: we'll pass this on to the other cel s, get them to watch out for unusual activity at aerospace factories, shipyards, that sort of thing.'

'I want to go into Windsor,' Lethbridge-Stewart announced, 'We need more detailed maps.'

Bambera chuckled, presumably by the thought that an elite military force needed to pop to the shops for supplies.

'I'll try and phone Doris, too,' he whispered across to me.

'No,' I said firmly.

He frowned. 'Why not? Do you think the Martians will be monitoring phone cal s?'

'Not the Martians. They are a noble warrior race, and such tricks are beneath them. I'm worried by the humans.'

The soldier considered what I was saying, then nodded. I took Lethbridge-Stewart to one side. 'Take Bessie,' I offered.

'I wasn't sure whether - '

'Take the car. If you need to make a getaway, you'll need it.'

A smile flickered across his face. 'Thank you, Benny. If I'm not back by nine-thirty, then I won't be coming back.'

He lifted the map off the bonnet, and handed it over to her.

'Er, do you mind if you fold this up, Alistair?' I asked, 'I never real y got the knack.'

When the Brigadier looked at me, there was a twinkle in his eye. 'Truth to tell, Mrs Summerfield, neither did I.

When I joined the army I made it my business to get promoted quick smart so that someone else could do all the folding for me.'

We turned back to the main group, and the Brigadier passed the map back over to Bambera, who began to fold it without being asked.

'Look after yourself,' I chuckled as Lethbridge-Stewart climbed stiffly into the driver's seat.

'Of course I will.'

A couple of corporals were pulling open the door for him. Bessie shot silently out and off onto the dirt track.

Bambera was shaking his head. 'Shame.'

'That's why they call them "The Blunder Days", ma'am,' Captain Ford said. 'He thinks we can go in, al guns blazing.'

The sniggering continued for a couple of seconds until I rounded on them. 'At least he's doing something. At least he isn't sitting in a wood, waiting for the Martians to find us.' They looked blankly at me.

'Professor Summerfield,' Bambera said sharply. 'I've read the files: back in the seventies, Brigadier Lethbridge-Stewart repulsed a couple of smal -scale incursions. I've read his reports, and he relied on two things: luck and the Doctor. Since we've not had any luck, and your friend turned out to be half-lemming on his mother's side - ' her voice trailed away.

'I'm going for a walk.' I announced levelly. A witticism had just occurred to me, one of those peculiar expressions Ace would come up with. 'Sod this for a game of soldiers,' I called back as I headed for the door.

I took my mug, leaving them to compile their reports and sit around on their assimilations. I felt an overwhelming urge to get out of the camp, to be on my own. Without thinking, I wandered out beyond the perimeter and found myself a sheltered spot facing away from the camp. I sat with my back to a tree trunk, my eyes closed. A hundred yards away, a line of black-clad Provisional Government troops with raised rifles marched forwards as if they were directed by Eistenstein himself, gunning down everything in their path. At least they could

have been doing for all I cared. This wasn't my timezone, it wasn't even my own home planet.

There was a dull shape in my chest, something that a week ago had been a sense of loss. I had spent the week crying, not for one lost Doctor but two. I found it difficult to mourn for the young man who had run off into the red cloud, frock coat flailing. Although Alistair recognised his old friend, I only saw a stranger - irritating new habits and mannerisms, virtual y nothing of the old body language. Carefree instead of careful. A little brother or first boyfriend, not a father. It wasn't just him - his death had robbed the universe of all future Doctors, young and old, fat and thin, bald and hairy. Now the Doctor had gone, we would have to sort al this out on our own.

It was a daunting prospect. Where did one begin? What would the Doctor have done? He'd have tried to talk to the Martians, he'd have made them see reason. If they couldn't do that, then he'd use their own weapons against them. He'd find out what the Martians were really planning and he'd stop it, once and for all. He wouldn't use guns, he'd talk to them. And he'd have sorted it all out in about an hour and a half, two hours tops.

And he'd make it al look so easy.

A twig snapped behind me, but before I had time to turn, I was pushed down onto the floor.

'Don't move.' It was a lanky man in a tattered business suit. He was holding me down, and he had a knife. 'Stay still or I kill you. Keep quiet.'

I nodded. The man waved the knife a little closer, betraying his nervousness, rather than his resolve.

'Good morning,' I replied.

'I said shut - '

I grabbed his wrist, slammed it against a tree trunk and kicked his feet from under him. He toppled over, and I stuck my knee in the back of his neck. It had been a while since I'd had cause to use my Aikido, and so I was rather gratified that I could stil lift my leg so high.

'Let me go,' he screamed. 'Civilisation.'

'What?' I scowled.

'Civilisation. It's the end of the world. The end of everything. Ten days ago I was a civil engineer. Now look at me.'

I considered my options, then stood. 'You're talking about being civilised. So let's cut out all this knife and kung-fu crap and talk.'

The man scrambled to his feet. I held out my hand and we introduced ourselves. The stranger said his name was Raymond Heath.

'OK, Ray. You were a civil engineer. Where?'

The sound of boots crunching through undergrowth. Soldiers from the base were hurrying to my aid, taking up positions behind me.

'Are you OK, Professor Summerfield?' one of the lads asked.

'Yes thank you, private.'

The soldiers stayed alert, scanning the wood to make sure my assailant was on his own.

'Carry on,' I told Ray quietly.

'I worked at the EG refinery, just outside Reading.'

'The what?' I asked.

'EG. You know: one of the Greyhaven companies.'

So I listened.

***

Lethbridge-Stewart was slotting coins into the pay-and-display machine. While the mechanism whirred, he checked the car park. No-one was watching him, except a three-year old with a bal oon.

As far as he knew, neither he nor Benny's photograph had appeared in the press or on television in the last week.

Perhaps the authorities thought that they had died in Adisham. More likely, with the Doctor dead, they weren't considered a threat any longer. The Brigadier had reached that conclusion himself, but he'd rather hoped that UNIT would pose more of a threat.

Lethbridge-Stewart quickened his pace a little, passing through a row of trees to the main street. He used to live in Gerrard's Cross, so he'd been to Windsor his fair share of times over the years. The streets were as busy as he remembered, there was even a school party making its way over to the Castle. London was less than an hour away, just along the M4. The population of that city was living in fear, under curfew, with a kilometre long warship hovering over them. Here, people were going about their daily business. A quartet of Etonians passed him, moaning that the BBC had cancelled last night's episode of *The X Files* 'due to recent events'.

Lethbridge-Stewart could see the WH Smiths sign now. He continued towards it, pausing every so often to look into other shop windows. This was a simple technique. If anyone was fol owing you, they'd have to stop as well, or walk straight past you. You could also check the reflected image of the other side of the street, without having to look directly at a potential tail. As part of his basic espionage training, he'd walked down Oxford Street, from one end to the other. Half a dozen MI5 man were trailing him. His primary goal was to shake them off, the second was to identify as many of them as he could at the debrief afterwards.

The point was, of course, that he couldn't do either. If you walk down a street, people look at you. If you are going to Smiths, chances are a dozen others are too, so they'll be walking down the same pavements. At the debrief, he'd been honest enough to admit that he couldn't spot anyone who was definitely following him. He described a couple of the people he thought might have been MI5 agents, al of whom had been innocent passers-by. He got points for honesty, and realism. Despite all his weaving in and out of shops, he doubted that he'd shaken off the men following him. He had managed to drop out of sight for almost a full minute, more than enough to pass over or drop off any documents he might have been carrying. He'd passed that part of his training.

He walked into Smiths, checking the dozen or so shoppers. He paused at an empty newspaper rack.

'Excuse me,' he asked the nearest assistant, 'but - '

'Oh there aren't any,' she said in a sing-song voice.

'The government have banned them?'

'S'pose.'

'You don't seem terribly interested,' he informed her.

'Don't take much interest in it. Politics,' she explained. 'You know "beef's safe to eat", "'no it isn't". It's all made up.

Everyone eats beef again now, don't they?'

'I never stopped,' Lethbridge-Stewart informed her.

'Even though it might turn your brain into a sponge? A load of people stopped eating it for a couple of weeks, but only when it was in the news. It'll be the same with the Martians. Already is. I'm used to them now, and they ain't that bad.'

Lethbridge-Stewart continued on to the 'local interest' section. There was a shelf there full of Ordnance Survey maps. He picked up a couple for north of here. If they wanted to prevent being captured, they needed the best knowledge of the terrain available. With the right intel igence, they could evade the Martians and the Provisional Government forces for months. The resistance would be able to collect intelligence data and keep one step ahead of the enemy.

Brigadier Lethbridge-Stewart frowned. And then what would they do? Wait for the Americans or the United Nations to bail them out? It wasn't going to happen. With every passing day, the international situation was more stable -

the governments of the world were finding it easy to accommodate the Martian presence. The resistance needed to strike, to hit right at the centre of the Provisional Government. But with London under martial law, how could they? And how could they do that without provoking Martian retaliation? Britain wasn't just at war with itself, it was at war with another planet. No wonder no other countries were going to get involved.

The Doctor had been right: the Martians wouldn't stop at Britain. They had to be beaten back. But he was just one old man, standing in a newsagents worrying that someone would recognise him. He didn't even have enough money to buy all the maps he wanted to. What could he do on his own?

He could fight.

The Brigadier realised that he wasn't on his own. He had UNIT, he had half the British army and, despite what that girl had just said, he was sure he had virtually al the British people.

He could lead.

***

Oswald and Dave had been staring at the packet for almost the whole hour since the postman had delivered it.

There was a rather odd instruction on the back: DO NOT OPEN - WAIT ONE HOUR. The mystery had intrigued Oswald, and fifty nine minutes later the padded envelope was still sealed. Early on, they'd established that it contained a videotape.

96

'It's probably from a charity for menks traumatised by having their entire video collection wiped by a giant Martian UFO.'

Oswald was weighing the packet in his hands. 'The ship clearly generates an intense magnetic field.'

'Clearly.'

They turned. A tall man in a neat blue suit had just come through the doorway. He looked like a pilot or a soldier, but he was old - fifty-five at least. He had a peculiar angular face. Dave was sure that he recognised the man from somewhere.

The man took his pipe from his mouth. 'Good morning, lads. I believe that you have a package for me.'

***

Extract from the memoirs of Professor Bernice Summerfield

'We have to stop them.'

Lethbridge-Stewart was shouting so loud we could hear him from outside the mess. The soldiers on the door were a little more hesitant with their salutes, and they were clearly embarrassed by the noise.

We stepped into the old barn. Bambera and Ford were glaring at Alistair.

'There's nothing I would like more than to "stop them",' Bambera said curtly. 'But I will not send my men on a suicide mission. If you've assembled the command staff simply to - '

'The Martians won't stop at Dover, you know. The world is at stake here.'

Captain Ford pointed to his charts. 'Brigadier, as soon as we know the full extent of the Martian plan, we can begin to sabotage it. Guerrilla tactics: block their convoys, blow up their factories. Ferment civil unrest ... '

'Until?' Lethbridge-Stewart asked.

'What do you mean?'

'Why are we playing at being the French Resistance? Who are our allies, who will help us?'

'No-one is happy with the Martian presence,' Bambera reminded him. 'The EU imposed trade sanctions to prevent the export of Martian technology. The UN would have passed that Alien Non-Proliferation Resolution if it wasn't for the Chinese veto.' With only six weeks to go before the British were due to leave Hong Kong, the Chinese were going out of their way to stay on good terms with the Martians. The United Kingdom's membership of the UN was officially 'under review', but in reality little had changed. They hadn’t even lost their seat on the Security Council.

'The government-in-exile are rallying support for us. The Queen is in Washington at - '

'The US Congress has already agreed not to interfere in Britain's "internal affairs". They want the Martian technology. The EU members haven't withdrawn their embassy staff. Bambera, we are on our own. We have to take the lead.'

'How?' she said scornful y.

Lethbridge-Stewart began to explain the plan that he had formulated on the way back from town. 'The Provisional Government is based in London, but we know that their military forces are al in the north, or heading up there.

They are going to secure the northern cities - Manchester, Leeds and York are all Royalist strongholds. At the moment, the Provisionals can't even think of moving north of there, and so Scotland's almost untouched, apart from the air-raid on Edinburgh.'

'One snag here, Brigadier,' Bambera reminded him. 'The Martian ship

is hanging over London. It would make short work of anyone that tried to attack the capital. That's why we've not moved before now.'

'We're not just at war with one ship, Brigadier, we're at war against an entire planet,' Captain Ford reminded everyone.

'Not the whole of Mars,' I corrected. 'Just one clan: the Argyre.' They noticed me for the first time.

Lethbridge-Stewart hadn't finished with Bambera. 'The lads in Portsmouth damaged the Martian ship. It can be done, with surface-to-air missiles and heavy artillery. They are not invincible.'

Bambera straightened and faced me. 'You know your Martians, Professor. Did we really manage to sting them?'

I thought about the question for a moment, realising that the lives of all the men in the camp depended on my answer. 'Yes,' I said finally, 'They don't have forcefields or anything like that.'

'So an air strike could knock the Martian ship out of the sky?' Ford asked.

'In theory, if they could get close enough. The Martian gunners wil know the planes are in the air before your own radar operators and they'll be able to keep better track of them once they are flying. If you could get around that somehow, the big problem would be the magnetic engines: they don't emit heat, so heatseekers wouldn't work, they do generate magnetic flux, which would play merry hell with your guidance systems.'

'What about a nuclear strike?' the Brigadier asked.

I grimaced. 'Thinking of calling your old friends on the Revenge? Hobson, wasn't it?'

He narrowed his eyes. 'How the devil did you know about that?'

I smiled. 'It's a long story. Yes, a nuclear strike would work, and I doubt the Martians would have any more of a defence against an ICBM than you have. It would also kill about a million Londoners straight away and another two or three million over the next ten years.'

'I was only speaking hypothetically,' Lethbridge-Stewart told me.

'Glad to hear it.'

'We won't have to fight the Martian ship,' Lethbridge-Stewart announced. 'Not until we've re-taken London.'

Bambera was rubbing her forehead. 'How are we going to do that?' she asked wearily. 'No. Cancel that. Alistair, I appreciate that you're trying to help, but throwing ourselves at the Martians like the Charge of the Light Brigade won't help anyone. We sit tight.'

'No we won't,' I said firmly.

The officers were all glaring at me. I motioned for my companion to come forwards. It looked like he had been crying.

'This is Raymond Heath. He's got a story for us.'

'H-hello. I was a civil engineer at the EG Plant just outside Reading. We were making a fertiliser, al very hush-hush. Lord Greyhaven was in personal charge of the project, and he told us that what we were doing would eventual y be used on Mars. We assumed he meant when the humans colonised it.' he paused. 'Real y it was for the Martians themselves. On that first Friday morning, a Martian shuttlecraft arrived at the plant. A Martian scientist, Vrgnur took over, and anyone who objected was kil ed. Vrgnur stays in his shuttle, but the whole refinery is patrol ed by Government troops with machine guns. No-one's allowed to leave - we had to sleep in the canteen.'

The assembled officers were al staring at him, making him even more nervous than he natural y was.

I smiled at him, trying to put him at his ease. 'But if all you were doing was making fertiliser ... '

Ray became more animated. 'But we weren't. The project changed when the Martian arrived. Now we were growing some bacteriological weapon. A red gas.'

I stepped forwards again. 'This is the poison gas that the Martians used on Adisham - it's what kil ed the Doctor.'

The members of the audience that had known the Doctor shifted in their chairs, Lethbridge-Stewart included. I continued: 'Adisham was just a test. I think the gas is the weapon that the Martians will use to

destroy humanity.'

Ray nodded. 'They were testing the gas on prisoners. They would turn up in Prison Service vans and be led into the - ' he broke off. 'This was happening in Berkshire. It still is. They forced us to do it, at gunpoint. I - ' he was having difficulty speaking now. I put her arm over his shoulder.

'They were gassing prisoners?' Captain Ford asked quietly.

I nodded. 'Fifteen miles away from here, and then burying the bodies in mass graves. Ray managed to escape, he's been wandering the countryside ever since.'

'But how did the Martians manage to set all this up without anyone knowing?'

'The Home Office must have helped set it up,' Bambera said. 'They must co-operating with this. People knew.'

'And now we know,' I said quietly. 'So do we stay here and let it carry on?'

There was fire in Lethbridge-Stewart's eyes. 'No. We fight it,' he said. 'We fight it and we stop it. In twenty four hours, the last Martian will have left British soil.'

'How, exactly?' Bambera asked.

The Brigadier broke into a broad smile. 'I'm glad you asked me that question ... '

Chapter Thirteen

Earth Attacks!

Friday, May 16th 1997

'What's the latest from Portsmouth, Simon?'

'Our boys have picked up about a hundred survivors, Prime Minister. There are some photos on your desk.'

Greyhaven found the pictures next to the proposed new designs for banknotes. He stared at pictures: piles of rubble where buildings once stood, ships pitched over onto their sides, with great cracks and punctures in the metal. More victims to Xznaal's brutal efficiency. He'd never done it himself, but Greyhaven knew that some small children poured water over ant nests, to watch them suffer. The ants wouldn't be able to comprehend what was going on. Perhaps they had ant religion, with a complex set of beliefs regarding divine behaviour. Even if they found a way to communicate with their destroyer and asked him 'why?' they wouldn't get a proper answer. The best they could hope for would be 'why not?'

He hadn't been back to the Greyhaven Building overlooking the Thames since the night the Martian ship had arrived. The cleaner would have made the bed, and removed every single trace that Eve had ever been there, except perhaps for an empty jewellery box. Watching banks of red fog rage around Adisham, Greyhaven could have destroyed Xznaal then and there, but he decided to wait. The Martians still had their uses. Xznaal had told him that he would not be manufacturing any more of the Red Death - although Greyhaven suspected that the decision had more to do with the fact that the Martians couldn't predict or control the behaviour of the gas.

'Are there any of the leaders?'

Simon flipped through the report. 'None. We've found the bodies of a couple of Admirals and Generals, but no sign of the resistance command staff. They must have been in one of the other strongholds.'

'A package for you, Prime Minister,' a man announced. He had come into the room without knocking.

When the Prime Minister looked up, he saw why. It was Alexander Christian, clean-shaven in a neat blue suit, holding a smal parcel.

Simon lunged for him, and then fell back, unconscious, dragging a tea service onto the carpet with him. The sound of the crash brought a quick response, but the large man who came through the door was dealt with equally swiftly, slumping to the floor with a gruff groan.

Christian had kept the parcel in his right hand the whole time. Now he handed it over to the Prime Minister.

Greyhaven didn't even try to reach for the pistol or panic button in his desk.

'Good morning, Lex. Is that an axe in your pocket or are you just pleased to see me?'

'You deserve to die for what you did to my crew, and what you did to me.' Christian said curtly. 'I spent twenty years in a cell because you sold Britain out to the Martians. You're not the only one who's spent twenty years making plans.'

He pul ed out a handgun, held it up.

'Believe me, if I was going to kill you, you'd be dead by now. Open the envelope.'

Greyhaven tugged out the videotape that had been slotted snugly inside. There wasn't a label on it, or a note. It had come from Crawley, according to the postmark. The delivery address had been scrawled out, but it wouldn't take a forensics team long to uncover it.

'A picture speaks a thousand words, *Prime Minister*,' Christian said in a low voice.

Greyhaven moved over to the little television and VCR in the corner of the room. The television screen rippled with thick diagonal lines.

'The tape's blank,' he said. Then a thought occurred to him and he flicked a little switch on the back. It was a couple of seconds before the picture flashed up. When it did, it showed a flat expanse of concrete. The tape was an NTSC recording. He didn't look back over his shoulder.

Instead, Greyhaven concentrated on the tape, trying to work out what he was watching. There was a timecode along the bottom: 5/14/97 09.05. It had been taken the day before yesterday.

The picture was jerky, the cameraman was trying to move it around in

a tight circle. He was probably undercover.

There wasn't a soundtrack. The Martian ship was drifting overhead, like a storm cloud. The cameraman kept it in shot for five or six seconds, then brought the camera around. Greyhaven could see now that the ship was floating over a runway. He glanced down at the envelope again. If it was sent from Crawley, it seemed logical that this was Gatwick Airport. But Gatwick had been closed since the Martians arrived. Al the airliners had been transferred over to Heathrow to help with the repatriation of the tourists.

The picture jerked again, and there was a disorientating zoom to a row of blue Transit vans parked by a hangar building. There were policemen there, opening up the back of the vans. It was blurred, a little too far for the camera to pick out many details.

The cameraman must have realised. The picture flickered, and now the timecode read 9.12. He had moved to within a hundred yards or so. There were about a hundred men lined up, all in blue and grey overalls. There must have been two dozen policeman watching over them, all of whom carried pistols or rifles.

There was another zoom. The front of one of the Transit vans now filled the screen. The white lettering was very clear: HM PRISON SERVICE. The first two letters had actually been scraped away, but their outlines were stil visible.

The picture now panned back up to the underside of the Martian craft, and it took a moment for the cameraman to adjust the focus. A hatch was retracting at the front of the spaceship. As the red light began creeping out from the 99

opening, Greyhaven could make out a dark shape the size of a large house. The shape detached itself, and began drifting downwards. It was boomerang-shaped, and built from glistening dark green metal. It was a shuttlecraft of some kind, and only took ten or fifteen seconds before it had descended the short distance to the runway. The picture panned down with it.

The policemen were ushering their prisoners forwards towards the shuttlecraft.

The picture dissolved into static. Greyhaven tried fast-forwarding the tape, to see if there were any more clips. The rest of the tape was blank.

Greyhaven's face was ashen. 'What are they doing with those prisoners?'

Alexander Christian watched him carefully. 'You don't know, do you?'

'No.'

'That shuttlecraft was destroyed shortly after those pictures were taken. You didn't know that, either, did you?'

'A Martian ship was destroyed?'

'That's the reason they attacked Portsmouth. Revenge for their loss. They are vicious, war-like. They'l destroy everything, you included.'

'I can control them.'

'You're too clever to trust Xznaal, old chap, and we know you've got something up your sleeve. Whatever it is, use it now. You won't get another chance.'

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Extract from the memoirs of Professor Bernice Summerfield

Much has been written about the Battle of London, very little of it by people who were actually there, as I was. The day began sitting in the officer's mess of the UNIT encampment, a map of Berkshire hanging on one wal , a map of London on the other. All of us knew that we would be writing history. We were full of that gung-ho spirit that seizes all sections of a population at time of war. Whatever your politics, whatever your thoughts about the rights and wrongs of the situation, you are always glad when "our boys" win and the enemy's boys don't. It's always been the same from the streets of ancient Uruk to the common room of a twenty-seventh century university. You forget that the enemy feels the same, you forget that every civilisation, even your own, falls in the end. I'd seen empires topple - including my own, but that's another story - yet I was swept along as much as anyone.

'This will be a two-pronged attack,' Lethbridge-Stewart announced. He seemed ten years younger, I thought. There was a bounce in his step, determination in his voice. The other soldiers were listening to him now.

He slapped his swagger stick against the first map. 'Step One: a small

assault team led by Captain Ford takes out the refinery. Ray has agreed to go along, and he'll show you where to plant explosives for maximum effect.

Primary objective is to destroy production facilities and any stocks of gas already prepared. The secondary objective is to capture the Martian scientist, Vrgnur.'

I raised my hand, and the Brigadier took my question. 'Could I go along with that group? I'm the only one who can talk to Vrgnur, and I know a little about Martian shuttlecraft.'

Lethbridge-Stewart nodded. 'That's where your expertise will be most useful,' he agreed. 'Now, we know that the warship hasn't come back to the refinery since it dropped off the shuttlecraft. That means that the warship doesn't have the gas on-board and if the Martians want to use it, they will have to go to Reading to collect it. Because the gas in crucial to their plans, it also means that when the refinery is attacked, they'l rush to defend it.'

Lethbridge-Stewart crossed the room, passing the rows of officers. 'And that leads us to stage two. Al Royalist units will converge on London. We'll move in along al major routes - our forces will head straight down the M4 and at the moment the bombs go off destroying the refinery, we'l be in Westminster.'

Bambera had kept quiet ever since she'd handed over command to Lethbridge-Stewart, but now she was speaking. 'The Martian ship might stay behind to guard London, even if the refinery is threatened.'

I shook my head. I'd talked this through with Alistair, and we had agreed what would happen. 'The Martians are interested in themselves, not humans. When the refinery is threatened, they'll move.'

'And when that happens,' Lethbridge-Stewart said, 'our aircraft wil attack it. They'll try to box it in, and bring it down. If that doesn't work, they should at least delay its return to London.'

'That still leaves the Provisional Government,' Bambera said. 'A lot of their forces are committed in the north, I know, but there are plenty left behind. They'll know we are coming - we can't keep half a dozen military convoys a secret.'

Lethbridge-Stewart smiled. 'They wil know we are coming, Brigadier Bambera, because we will tell them. We wil tell the world.'

End of extract

***

Xztaynz was showing Xznaal some 'medieval' art. The religious subject matter and naive rendering failed to interest him. One more day, and they would have visited every room in the National Gallery, and seen every painting that was not publicly displayed. The National Portrait Gallery sounded unpromising - all those rows upon rows of ugly primate faces - and so they'd skip that. Next week, they would scour the British Museum.

The large fossils and Egyptian exhibits were going to be of particular interest, Xznaal could see that just from the catalogues that Staines had supplied. The walls of his palace on Earth, the White Tower, were now lined with human art from this place.

100

A human came towards them, with that nervous scuttling motion that they had. Xznaal recognised that this was a female. They were smal er than the males on the whole, and wore brighter cloth. This one had red talons, and they were sharpened. No doubt this was to protect her offspring from predators until they had finished dropping from her mammal body and were able to defend themselves. It seemed a most unhygenic arrangement. She was holding a communicator in her paw.

'Good morning, Home Secretary. Er... Your Majesty.' Whenever he left the confines of his ship, Xznaal was always careful to wear the Imperial State Crown, as now, yet for some reason the humans failed to accept this symbol of authority. The human race lacked the discipline and respect for their leaders of a civilised people.

He waved a claw. 'Good morning.'

'This is Miss Helmond,' Xztaynz explained. 'What do you have to tell us?'

'The Royalist terrorists have launched an attack on London, Home Secretary. Our spotters report that they have blocked off the M25 and they are moving in on most of the major routes.'

'That's suicide,' Xztaynz objected. 'It's a co-ordinated assault?'

'They've taken over local radio stations, there's going to be a broadcast at mid-day. That's the same time that the Queen... the, er, ex-Queen,'

she corrected herself quickly, 'wil address the UN General Assembly.'

Xznaal hissed. 'What iss happening?'

'They can't possibly succeed, your majesty. We outnumber them, we are holding a string of defensive positions, we have the warship, we - '

'Enough. We wil return to the ssafety of the Tower. Have Gerayhayvun join uss there.'

***

Extract from the memoirs of Professor Bernice Summerfield

Bessie streaked through the countryside at an implausible speed. The UNIT Land Rover following them was struggling to keep up.

I tried to dredge up what I could remember of the local traffic laws. None of the careful y-designed, non-cultural y specific road signs that lined the route made the slightest bit of sense to me.

Beside me, Ray was hanging on for dear life, unable to put his trust in the sophisticated inertial maintenance system that the Doctor had installed. The two soldiers in the back - Captain Ford and Sergeant Jenkins - were also looking a bit green.

'Professor,' Ray whimpered, 'I'd feel safer if there was a seat belt.'

'Are we nearly there?' I asked. We'd been on the road for twenty minutes so we ought to have been by now.

'Nearly.' Ray seemed subdued.

'Are you OK?' I asked. We were al nervous - even the trained fighters. Combat was like public speaking or acting -

if you aren't nervous, you're not only doing something wrong, you're too stupid to realise.

'Benny,' Ray asked, 'Are you real y from the future?'

'Yes,' I replied.

'So we make it? Humanity survives? We are your ancestors, and this is all ancient history to you.'

'It doesn't work like that,' I said.

'But it must do.'

'No.'

'So what happens if this doesn't work?' Ray asked.

I thought about the question and tried to remember what the Doctor had told me about such things. The trouble was, he had said something slightly different every time I had asked. 'I don't know,' I admitted. 'I'll just be an anomaly, a glitch in the system. Something for future historians to ignore or come up with wild theories to explain away. I guess I'll just be retconned.'

Ray paused for a moment. 'I don't mean just for us. We'll die, I know that. But what about my kids?'

'This will work,' I assured him. 'This has to work.'

Ray's voice was even softer than normal. 'But what if it doesn't?' he repeated. 'It's a fair question,' he added.

Captain Ford leant forward. 'We'll succeed,' he said, with such a sense of certainty that I almost believed him myself. 'But if we didn't then mankind would survive - the Martians can't fight us in the deserts, can they? They'll stick to the Arctic areas: Scandinavia, Alaska, the Falklands. We'd have strongholds and hideouts. Just think about al the army bases around the world, all the nuclear submarines. The Martians might be more advanced, but that didn't stop the Afghans from beating back the Russians or the Vietnamese from defeating the Americans.

When the human race is forced to fight for its own territory, we fight.'

My mind raced with images of Rome falling to the Vandals, fuel air bombs sucking the oxygen from Iraqi air raid shelters, Daleks killing half the human population of the galaxy and overrunning whole planets without even leaving their ships. Bil ions had died defending their home territory. But despite all the wars, al the invasions and killing, the human race had survived. Arguing with the Captain's sentiments seemed childish, cowardly. I found myself wondering how many young soldiers down the ages had died not wanting to speak up and say that they were scared.

'It's almost time for the broadcast to start.'

As the digital clock on the dashboard flipped over to midday, I turned

on the radio. I'm copying the next bit from a history book, a fat blue paperback with a scary eye on the cover. As the author died five hundred and thirty one years ago, I doubt he'l mind, and even if he did he's out of copyright, so nerr.

101

I have to resort to the history books for this part of the story, because at the time we were driving to the refinery, I was unaware of events elsewhere in the country and the rest of the world.

***

SAS teams and other elite squads had secured the radio transmitters. In every town and city with a resistance cel , people knew that something was coming, that something was going to be broadcast at midday. Photocopied fliers were placed on car windscreens. In St Helens Square in York, the Town Crier read a proclamation to a crowd of Royalists. Elsewhere, loudspeakers were set up, and hastily-arranged press conferences were held in loyal embassies around the world. They were told that the resistance was going to make an announcement.

At mid-day, they heard a voice that they recognised. An Oscar-winning actor, reading from Henry V. Next a recording of Ray, explaining about the poison gas and Adisham. After a few second's silence, Lethbridge-Stewart spoke. He introduced himself, then:

'I am the commanding officer of the force that will liberate London. Not just from the Martians, but from those that betrayed you to the Martians. I serve Xznaal, Greyhaven and the rest of their Provisional Government notice: this is their last day in office. Our army is already mobilised. It is a small force, but it is larger than Henry's at Agincourt, and we have right on our side. The Provisional Government has lied to you: its members have been in league with the Martians for many years in their attempts to gain power. Now they have power, they use it against their own people: the air-raid on Edinburgh, shooting on civilians in Bradford, cutting off the water and electricity supplies in Chester and York. Thousands of people have died, but this is only the beginning. I saw for myself the effect of the Martian gas on Adisham. Unless they are stopped, the Martians wil wipe out mankind with their new weapon.

I don't mean to scare you: rest assured that the Martians can be stopped. With your assistance, they wil be stopped today. We would

ask those Londoners wishing to evacuate to head south, down to Kent. Those who wish to join us are equal y welcome - you can help us by cutting power and telecommunications lines, by barricading the smaller roads and by preventing the Provisional Government's security forces from barricading the major ones.

Hopeful y, we will not have to fire a single shot to end the Martian Occupation. It is now a quarter past twelve. Our tanks will be in Ealing, now. God willing, the Provisional Government wil have fallen within the hour.'

***

The speech finished, the broadcast cut to live coverage of the Queen's address to the United Nations. She had been informed of the effort to retake London and had given it her blessing. Her speech began by wishing Lethbridge-Stewart and his men luck. As she spoke, her advisors were outside, preparing to hand out press releases and lobbying ambassadorial staff.

Without any help from UNIT, details of the damage inflicted on the Martians in Portsmouth and the location and plans of the EG refinery had found their way to New York via the Internet. Pictures, text and sound files were downloaded onto the new computer newsgroups and bulletin boards that had been set up around the world. These had eventual y found their way to the world's military and media.

At an emergency session of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the President ordered that if the Martian ship left British airspace it was to be shot down, by any means necessary.

Unaware of events elsewhere in the world, half a dozen trained UNIT men followed Ray through the refinery and I followed the soldiers. Ray knew which routes the guards patrolled. The place was swarming with them, apparently, but I didn't see a single one. The troops were hand-picked by Captain Ford and moved through the base swiftly and silently. No doubt if we had come across any of the patrols, the UNIT men would have dispatched them with the same efficiency - each carried an automatic pistol with silencer, and enough knives to fill a cutlery drawer. Our main weapons were the packs of thermite explosive we carried in special belt pouches. Even I had three packs -

each was about the size of a paperback book but packed enough punch to bring down a house or blow open a tank. The UNIT boffins had told us that the high explosive generated enough heat to

incinerate even the most deadly nerve agents. When I had chal enged them, suggested that they might free the Martian gas rather than destroy it, they were proud to announce that mankind had devised much more virulent materials than the substance released over Adisham. The bombs would work, if enough of them were planted in the right locations.

Back in Windsor Forest, as soon as Lethbridge-Stewart had finished his briefing, Ray had drawn a map for the refinery assault team. He'd helped to build the plant four years ago, and he knew virtually every pipe and wire. To me, the refinery complex looked like an alien city, with pressurised skyscrapers and pipelines instead of pavements. In a way, of course, it was an alien city: the first Martian colony on Earth. The silos had been designed by Vrgnur for the sentient gas, and duplicated conditions on Mars. Behind the stainless steel, Vrgnur had been propagating something entirely inimical to man. At the time I knew little about the Red Death. Later, I would have time to search the ancient Martian texts and I would learn of an assassination weapon capable of passing through the narrowest gap in relentless pursuit of its target.

In the scarce atmosphere of Mars it was subtle, invisible. But when it fed on the abundant elements of Earth's atmosphere, it became bloated and bloodthirsty.

I ran my finger along a polished pipe no thicker than my arm. Just the slightest crack, just the tiniest break, and it would escape. Everything would die from the smallest microbe to the last blue whale. That didn't frighten me so much as the knowledge that the thing in these silos had killed the Doctor.

The UNIT force began splitting up, hurrying along carefully-prepared routes.

End of extract

102

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The box on the screen informed Dave that 87% of the information he had been amassing had been released into cyberspace. It would be appearing on various bulletin boards and inboxes.

'There's a crowd gathering,' he noted. They'd been listening to the radio, and they'd heard Lethbridge-Stewart's proclamation. Now a

steady stream of people was heading up towards Whitehal .

'The Brig's a legend,' Oswald continued. 'Some skywatchers think he's a myth, a codename. UNIT go in for that: the scientific advisor is always cal ed "the Doct-" '

Dave grabbed his arm. 'Come on.'

***

Lethbridge-Stewart checked his watch. 12.20 and they were in Chiswick. They were a little ahead of schedule. He was sitting besides Bambera in the staff car. Three of the tanks headed the convoy, then the armoured cars. The staff car was next, followed by the Land Rovers. The other two tanks brought up the rear. Motorcycle outriders were scouting ahead.

Outside, crowds were beginning to line the streets. It reminded Alistair of a royal visit. Some people were even waving little plastic Union Flags. Ordinary people were falling in behind the military convoy: policemen and firemen, even postmen in their uniforms. Socialist Workers and members of the British Legion weren't walking hand-in-hand, but they at least had common purpose.

'You were right,' Bambera conceded. 'it looks like we've got a fair few people on our side.'

'There's no sign of Government forces. We'd have expected a road block by now, at least.'

'Perhaps they are weaker than we thought,' Bambera suggested.

The radio crackled. 'Greyhound, this is Trap Seven.'

'Receiving. Where are you?'

'Tower Hill. There's quite a crowd gathering. It's like the Royal Wedding, sir.'

'Spare me the Dimbleby commentary, Corporal. How many people and what's their mood?'

'Thousands. It's a carnival.'

'Any sign of the Provs?'

'They are keeping a cordon around the Tower, they've sealed off

Downing Street. Defensive positions only at the moment, sir. We've had a lot of defectors.'

'Very good. Inform me if the situation changes.'

'Roger that, Greyhound.'

Bambera was smiling, not a common sight. 'It looks like we've got all sorts of people on our side.'

***

The Prime Minister looked out over London. Through fifty-one millimetre 13 ply laminated glass was the familiar skyline, with its familiar Martian warship.

It was so big. On the way to one of his meetings with Xznaal he'd stopped off at a newsagents by Fenchurch Street station. The shop was selling postcards showing the capital's latest tourist attraction. That had been on Saturday morning, not more than thirty-six hours after the invasion. Not that there were many tourists in London any longer. Before the Martians had come, the Tower of London had two million visitors a year - millions more buzzed around it without wanting to pay to get in. Now the streets and pavements around the walls were al but deserted for the first time in centuries. Many Londoners had fled the city to the Home Counties. The evacuation hadn't been orderly, dozens had died under the wheels of cars and vans and lorries charging away from the Capital, on both sides of the road. Most were living with friends or relatives, or in guest houses. Al the foreigners had gone, too. London hotels were empty, facing ruin. Walking along the deserted streets, the only language you heard was English. It made the city seem smaller, less alive. It was alive now. Even behind the bullet resistant window pane - no glass was truly bullet proof, four shotgun blasts at close range would be enough to penetrate it -

the Prime Minister could hear the sounds of Londoners in Trafalgar Square, demonstrating against him.

'Mussolini once said that ruling Italy was easy,' Greyhaven said.

'He was a friend of yours, was he?' Christian asked, adjusting his pipe.

'He said it was easy but utterly pointless,' Greyhaven finished. He reached into his pocket, checking for something he knew was there. 'Mussolini had a vision that his country could be great again, but he was a fool and he allied himself with a monster. He ended up strung

from a lamp-post by a mob of his own people.'

Alexander Christian stood there, impassive. Greyhaven smiled at him, not expecting a response. Final y, the Prime Minister tapped at his intercom.

'Tell me, how would I get to the Space Museum from here without those rioters tearing me apart?'

'We can arrange an escort, Prime Minister.'

'Do so. I will be downstairs in two minutes.'

Greyhaven combed his hair into place and slipped a fountain pen into his pocket. 'If you'll excuse me, Colonel, I have work to do.'

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103

Extract from the memoirs of Professor Bernice Summerfield

The Martian ship was unguarded. It was exactly as Ray had described it, and as I had expected from my excavation of the "ship's graveyard" at Tharsis. It was a V-wing, roughly the same size and shape as the pinnacle of human aviation at the time of the invasion, the B2 stealth bomber. It was built from a glistening green ceramic material, the name of which eluded me. I caught Ford's attention, and motioned that I was going in. Ford indicated that he would finish planting his explosives before joining me.

There were two ways into the shuttle: the main hatch at the front, and the cargo doors on the underside. Both were open. I chose the latter, edging forwards. A couple of fork lift trucks sat snugly in the shadow of the Martian craft.

Without even realising that I had slipped into Sherlock Holmes mode, I deduced from the tyre tracks that the fork lifts had been active recently. The cargo hatch looked like the bomb bay of a Lancaster bomber. As I approached the opening, the cold air from inside was wafting down.

I ducked underneath one of the cargo bay doors, poking my head up into the body of the ship. The shuttlecraft's hold was tiny, and there was only dim Martian lighting, but I could see that it had been packed solid with metal cylinders. Captain Ford was already out of sight and I

certainly couldn't call out for him. The tiny UNIT walkie-talkie in my pocket was also useless for the moment - we'd agreed at the briefing that this phase of the operation was being conducted under the strictest radio silence.

Everything was going according to my plan - the one that I hadn't shared with UNIT. I took a last look around to make sure that no-one had seen me, then pul ed myself up into the shuttlecraft. I sat on the edge of the hatch for a moment to congratulate myself for being so quiet. It took a moment for my eyes to adjust to the twilight, and I could feel the goosebumps developing on my legs and arms. It wasn't uncomfortably cold, though. The magnetic engines were on, and throbbing with power. Like every machine of its complexity, the shuttle was on the brink of being alive. Noises that the ship's builders couldn't have explained surrounded me, a hiss there, a clank here.

I was heading for the communications rig. Al Martian equipment is bulky. The communicator was the size of a telephone box, too big to slot into the cockpit. They tucked it away down here. I turned the corner.

The vast Martian scientist filled the alcove. He had his back to me. I edged away, trying not to make a sound.

Vrgnur hadn't seen me and was deep in a hissing, grunting conversation. I wasn't sure, but it was almost certainly Xznaal on the other end of the line. Like any language, there was a world of difference between the textbook Martian grammar and the col oquial form. The sound didn't carry very wel in the thin air, either. Despite all that, I could tell that the conversation was coming to an end.

I backed into something solid, the size of a tree trunk. I pul ed back, thinking it was another Martian, but it was merely a metal tank. I caught myself from screaming, sighing with relief, laughing and from making al the other little noises I was planning at that moment.

The gauge said that the cylinder was full to capacity. I bent over to double-check, resting my hand on the side of the container. Almost before my fingertips had touched the cold metal, whatever was inside surged towards them, clattering against the side like a bird in a cage.

I realised what it was.

Outside, Captain Ford and his men were planting explosives around an empty refinery. The poison gas had already been piped into the shuttle. The thing that had killed the Doctor was in here with me.

End of extract

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'Sir,' the human female Hellmond squeaked. 'I've just had a phone cal from Downing Street. The Prime Minister isn't going to the Tower. His car is being escorted to Trafalgar Square.'

'What?' Xznaal bel owed, sweeping around.

'Did he explain why?' Xztaynz asked quietly.

'He is going to the Space Museum, sir,' the female said.

Xznaal glared down at the two humans. 'Why?'

'I have no idea,' Xztaynz muttered. He struggled with some mental activity - a feat of memory, perhaps. 'Unless he... he said something about an insurance policy, and that... the Orbiter.'

Xznaal's eyes narrowed. 'We musst follow him.'

***

Extract from the memoirs of Professor Bernice Summerfield

Have you ever heard the expression "her mind raced"? In adventure stories, when faced with insurmountable odds and imminent death, the author tells us that the heroine's mind "races". My mind did no such thing. It sat there, nursing the mental equivalent of a hamstring injury. The primal instinct in these circumstances ought to be "flight or fight" - kil or run away. I stood there.

I managed to muster enough presence of mind to duck out of sight as Vrgnur detached himself from the communications alcove. In something akin to his native atmosphere, his breathing was quiet - I hoped that I could say the same about myself: Martian hearing was acute, possibly sharp enough to pick up the sound of a human heart slamming against a ribcage. Although I couldn't see or hear Vrgnur, I could feel his vast bulk moving across the deck of the shuttle, the metal reverberating with each footstep. Vrgnur paused, close to me. There was a wrenching sound, a pneumatic hiss and then the cargo bay doors slammed shut.

I was trapped in here, alone with the Martian.

Within seconds, Vrgnur was lumbering out of the hold, away from me. "Relief" seemed like a rather small word to describe what I was feeling. The Martian scientist was heading away from the hold to the cockpit. I checked my watch. I had only a little over a minute to get clear before Captain Ford set off the bombs.

I eased myself out of my hiding place and tried to find the control that opened the cargo hatch. It wasn't difficult -

the lever was four foot long, and bright red. It wouldn't have been out of place in an old-fashioned signal box. To Vrgnur, releasing the control would have been as easy as changing the gears of a car. But humans found it less easy, as I quickly discovered when I tried to apply all my weight to get the thing to budge.

Reader, I swore.

The sound echoed around the cargo hold, and didn't go away however much I wished that it would or however much I gritted my teeth.

Twenty seconds later, I still hadn't been killed by a Martian, so I decided that Vrgnur hadn't heard me. He would be safely strapped into his pilot's cradle by now, a chunky visor over his eyes, his claws tugging at the controls. Which would mean...

The shuttlecraft lurched skywards on a column of magnetic energy. At precisely that moment, I could hear the rumble of explosions outside. It was like being caught in a tidal wave.

As a train begins slowing at the end of every journey, when it's coming into the station and everyone is standing up, draping their coat over their arm ready to leave, there's always someone who contrives to pitch over and crash around, unable to manage even basic co-ordination. That person is generally me.

I tumbled to the floor, landing heavily on the metal deck.

Before I pul ed myself up, I unzipped one of the pouches on my belt, and tugged out one of the thermite packs. It was wrapped up in cellophane like a packet of cigarettes or a box of chocolates. I located the little strip and unwound it, slipping the bomb from its wrapper. Like all military hardware, like most things designed for men, it was black and ergonomic with little LEDs and ridges in the plastic so that it was easy to grip.

I checked the timing mechanism - usually the first thing to go on the

things. The bomb was working. I slid the control on the top, arming it. I could set the timer by tapping the little buttons, just like setting a digital watch or a VCR, or I could just press the red button and save myself the wait. One explosion would be enough to depressurise the shuttle. However much Vrgnur struggled with the controls, the ship would drop like a stone and dash itself against the English countryside. I was actually reaching for the button when I remembered my plan to end the invasion. I glanced back at the communications rig. There was an adhesive strip on the back of the bomb.

I attached the device to the nearest metal cylinder. For a few seconds the gas scuttled away at it, but I was already crossing the hold.

Vrgnur had deactivated the communicator. I examined the display and tried to twist one of the dials. It took a moment for my puny human wrists to get the dial to turn, but the holoplate began rezzing up. Martians had different colour and depth perception to a human, but I had seen enough Martian murals to work out what was going on.

I flicked a stiff switch, establishing the interplanetary carrier wave, then sat back - it was going to take a while before I would be able to tell whether it was working. I didn't have a while. The logo of the Martian Communicators Guild appeared in the hologlobe. I selected an open channel, cleared my throat and began speaking in what I hoped the Martians would recognise as their own language.

'This is Professor Bernice Summerfield of the clans of the United Kingdom. Our world has been invaded by the Lord Xznaal. Unable to win in combat, he formed an alliance with traitors and now skulks in his warship, afraid to leave its confines. We have heard legends of the mighty warrior race of Mars, and frankly we are shocked by this cowardly behaviour. He now loots and plunders our world for its weapons, raw materials, and best soldiers. I can't imagine what he's planning to do with all of them. He said something about going back to Mars and, er, what was it again? Oh yes "showing that stunted git Paxaphyr where he can stick the sword of Tubarr". Anyway, as I say, his warship is here now, along with his finest warriors. All of them here. And not there. Just thought you would like to know that. Er... byeeee.'

I tugged the 'off' control, took a deep breath and waited. I had done al that I could for the moment. What happened now depended on others.

End of extract

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Greyhaven parked his Aston Martin on a double yellow line and bounded up the steps of the National Space Museum. The five-minute car journey had taken three times as long - they'd had to take a different route to avoid the crowds of people converging on the Square as if it were the venue for the cup final. The Prime Minister was waved through the various security barriers and into Mission Control. He paused to catch his breath. Theo Ogilvy, the Mars 97 mission controller, was there.

'Prime Minister, this is - '

Greyhaven swept past him, slotting a computer disc into a terminal and tapping a few keys.

Xznaal grabbed him and threw him against the back wall.

Greyhaven struggled to concentrate. They had got here first, but he had managed to reach the terminal. Was his program running? Staines was staring at the bank of monitors. 'The Orbiter is still holding its position.'

105

Greyhaven stood. The Martian towered over him. 'I know of your planss. Xztaynz told me.' Xznaal raised his huge right claw and fired the gun on his wrist. The computer terminal pulsed and shattered.

'Staines isn't bright enough.'

'Oh but I am,' the Home Secretary said, stepping forwards. 'You were planning to send a signal to the Mars Orbiter. You opened the airlocks before by remote control. You were planning to drop a bomb or something.'

Greyhaven looked over at him, and when he spoke there was a tone of respect in his voice. 'The Mars 97 is powered by two atomic reactors. If the computers receive the right signal they can be set to misphase, and send each other critical. From this room, by sending a simple command sequence, it is possible to pilot the Orbiter to any point on the Martian surface and then detonate it. The explosion would be the equivalent of a one hundred megaton bomb. You can probably guess which part of Mars I targeted.'

'The Argyre,' Xznaal grunted. The territory of his own clan. He

checked the instruments once again. 'The Orbiter has not moved. You have failed.'

The Martian pointed at Greyhaven's legs and fired his sonic disruptor. Every bone below the knee joints shattered.

The Prime Minister buckled, unable to do anything but scream for the first couple of seconds.

Staines was smiling. 'You thought I was stupid, didn't you Teddy? You underestimated me, you see.'

Xznaal ignored him. 'Why?' he asked.

'Because you killed Eve,' Staines explained, trying to get back into the conversation. 'That blonde slip of a thing.

Really, Teddy, I told you that she'd be trouble.'

'Staines, you real y are an idiot,' Greyhaven said through clenched teeth. 'The fact that my so-called ally tried to murder an entire village full of innocent people, including a woman I was fond of didn't help, but I've always known that this... thing would try to betray me. He thinks that we're animals. What were you going to use those prisoners at Gatwick for? Medical experiments? Target practice? Food?'

The Home Secretary bent over him, smiling. 'The Martians need a workforce. You said so yourself.' Greyhaven could feel himself blacking out, but forced himself to remain conscious. 'Their population has seen rapid decline over recent centuries. Those criminals would have been put to useful work on Mars.'

Greyhaven's body was screaming at him, telling him that his only hope for survival was to lapse into unconsciousness. Greyhaven knew better than that: he wasn't going to survive. He only needed a minute more.

'Do you remember the words to "Rule Brittania"?'

Staines laughed. 'Of course. I even prefer it to "Martian Albion".'

'"Britons never shall be slaves."'

'Xznaal and myself are partners, Teddy. We knew that you'd try to double-cross us. The Martians are helping to solve prison overcrowding - those men are the lifers, the habitual criminals, the

least desirable of the undesirable.'

'The scum of the Earth,' Xznaal hissed in agreement.

Staines was smiling his idiot grin. 'The Martians are our natural rulers, Teddy. They are superior beings. Do you know how long Martians live? There are some alive now that were born when Shakespeare was writing.'

Xznaal stepped forward.

'And you think that the Martians will let you have any power?' Greyhaven rasped. 'They see our state-of-the-art science - our computers, lasers and nuclear reactors - and they sneer at them. To Xznaal, the pinnacles of human art are finger paintings. Our greatest philosophers speak platitudes not fit for the playground.'

The Martian raised his arm.

'It's going to kill the human race like a farmer sprays his crops, and with the same compassion for the insects. I knew that al along. I also knew that the Martians were weak - most of them are impotent, those that aren't are diseased or disordered. Look at that thing. Ask him why he needs constant blood transfusions. Ask him whether that massive brain of his can function without stimulants.'

'Marss iss dying, itss people are dying.' Xznaal admitted. 'But we have thiss world, we will adapt it to our needss.

Vrgnur has prepared plans for the first colonies. Within a century, this planet wil be Aress-formed - its temperature lowered, its atmosphere thinned. We wil ssurvive. You think that your puny human intel ect iss a match for mine?'

Greyhaven laughed.

'Iss he deliriouss?'

'No, I'm not,' Greyhaven snapped. He tried to stand up, but couldn't. He settled for straightening his tie. 'King Genius, you have overlooked one small detail.'

'Indeed?' Xznaal hissed scornfully.

'Yes,' Greyhaven said, only needing to block out the pain just long enough to finish one more sentence. 'The fact it takes five minutes to

send a radio message from Earth to Mars.'

Staines and Xznaal spun to face the monitors.

Greyhaven winced as he tried to grin. 'My signal should be arriving... now.' The room was becoming dark, it was closing in on him.

The Orbiter's telemetry began to alter, the altitude was dropping. The retros were firing. The nuclear reactors began redlining.

The computer interpreted the data, plotting the course of the Orbiter as it skipped down through the thin Martian atmosphere. It was past the equator, streaking over the Vallis Marineris and the Noctis Labyrinth, crossing the Mare Erythraeum several times faster than the speed of sound.

If the Martians lived underground, Greyhaven reflected, they probably couldn't hear the Orbiter slicing its way down. The atmosphere there was so thin that sound wouldn't carry too well. But the perpetual Martian twilight would be gone. The Martians were scared of fire, and now their sky was ablaze.

The Orbiter detonated, right above the Argyre. The signal ended abruptly.

106

Greyhaven was still laughing when Xznaal broke his neck.

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From the memoirs of Professor Bernice Summerfield

A little over ten minutes after I had sent my message, a Martian Lord appeared in the hologlobe. Unlike Xznaal, he wore his armour streamlined, complete with cloak. Moving in his own gravity, and breathing Martian air, he was graceful as a dancer.

'Bernicesummerfield,' it said, 'I am Balgrar of the clan Thaumasia. Your news is grave. We Martians value honour above all. Xznaal has shamed our race, and let me assure you that he does not represent our people. He is the leader of but one clan, the Argyre, and their attack on your world was not sanctioned by the Grand Marshall. Know then that all on Mars stand with you against the Argyre and that a punitive expedition of war-barges is even now on its way to - '

The picture disappeared, vanishing in an explosion of static that almost made me jump from my seat.

'What the f- '

Martian hieroglyphs were flashing up across the screen. It told me that there wasn't a problem with the hardware at this end and that it was trying to re-establish a link with the Martian communications network. I bit my lip.

The screen flashed up an answer: there had been a massive electromagnetic pulse and all communications would be impossible until the equipment was reset or replaced. I stared at the hologlobe, and al I could think was that the static swirling around the three dimensions of the hologlobe looked like maggots in a bucket.

There had been a nuclear explosion on the surface of Mars. Either the Argyre were firing them, or the rival clans had launched them in retaliation. Either way, millions of Martians were dying as I sat there. When Xznaal discovered that his home world was at war, that there would be nothing to go back to...

I had one option left. I was back across the room in seconds, my finger stabbing towards the detonator. I didn't even think. It didn't occur to me that this might be the action that released the Red Death, that the bomb might only crack the cylinder casing rather than obliterate the gas completely.

The merest moment's consideration and I might have realised that pressing the button would destroy mankind.

I truly thought I had nothing to lose. But as one claw caught my wrist, another encircled my neck and I was yanked into the air and away from the bomb, I realised that I was wrong. It could get worse. And at that moment, as I felt Vrgnur's cold breath on the back of my neck, I knew that it was over. Whatever we tried to do, however bravely we fought, wherever we hid, the human race was going to be hunted down and driven to extinction by creatures such as this: a species cleverer than we were, stronger than us. More relentless, more powerful. This was the end.

End of extract

Chapter Fourteen

Look! - Up In The Sky!

The Brigadier's limousine arrived in Trafalgar Square shortly before one o'clock. Behind the UNIT convoy was a column of people a mile long.

The Square had already been filling up. The crowd were safely behind the barriers that had been set up the week before and had never been taken down. As Lethbridge-Stewart drove past, they cheered and waved. It was all very reminiscent of a royal visit. Some people were even waving little plastic Union Flags, others were clutching helium balloons. Most of them were clustered around the Column, sitting alongside the lions like so many millions of tourists and revellers down the years.

A small UNIT squad had arrived twenty minutes before, and had set up a mobile HQ, recovered from the underground garage of the UNIT office. The Brigadier found himself smiling, and then it dawned on him why: the large grey van was parked alongside the TARDIS. Professor Summerfield had told him that it would be there. That wasn't the same as seeing it. After al this was over, he would have the TARDIS taken somewhere safe. He would have Adisham searched for the Doctor's body. An immortal race had no need of funeral customs, but Lethbridge-Stewart would see that his friend was given a proper burial.

'That's odd.' Bambera had seen the police box, too, and she knew what it was, but it didn't hold the same memories for her. She was busy scanning the crowd, assessing the level of danger, looking for the enemy. Al the things he ought to have been doing. 'The crowd are already facing this way, sir,' she informed him.

Lethbridge-Stewart told the driver to park the car alongside the mobile HQ. 'Really?'

He did quick recce. Bambera was right. There must have been a couple of thousand people there, and the vast majority were looking not at the vast Martian spaceship to the East, or towards Westminster to the South. They were staring at the entrance to the Space Museum.

A young Corporal was opening up his door and saluting him. Lethbridge-Stewart went through the formalities, then, 'What's going

on?'

'There's a Martian in there, sir. Went in about twenty minutes ago with the Home Secretary, just before we arrived.'

Lethbridge-Stewart did what everyone else was doing, he stared at the door. So far, only a handful of Martians had left the ship, the two that had been killed at the Doctor's house, the scientist and Xznaal himself.

'It's the leader, isn't it?' he asked. The Corporal nodded.

'How do you know?' Bambera asked the Corporal.

'There were a few people already here, ma'am. Not just that, the Home Office chauffeur and aide came over to our side the moment we arrived. They are both still a bit shocked by it all.'

Lethbridge-Stewart nodded towards the mobile HQ. 'Those two are both in Trap One, I take it?'

'Sir,' the Corporal confirmed.

'Is the Square secure?' All around them, the rest of the UNIT vehicles had arrived, much to the delight of the crowd. The soldiers, al of them so young, were jumping down, taking out all the carefully stowed equipment. Their tanks were lining up outside Charing Cross Road station.

'Yes, ma'am. The Provisionals have al pulled back to defend Downing Street and the Tower, we've done a quick sweep of the buildings. There's a column of Government tanks along the Embankment and Thames Street. We have them under close observation from Trap Two, at Tower Hill. We can see over the wal s onto Tower Green from there.'

'Snipers?'

'None of theirs any more. We have men at both positions, sir, with strict orders not to fire unless ordered to.'

Lethbridge-Stewart allowed himself to relax a little. 'Good man,' he concluded.

Bambera pointed over the tops of the buildings to the Martian ship. 'The plan was that the enemy ship would move when the refinery went up,' she reminded him. That had been a little under five minutes

ago.

'We also thought that it would prevent our build-up if it was still here, but they've just ignored us,' he responded.

'The Professor was right: the Martians will only intervene if they are personal y threatened. If we fire on a Martian, that spacecraft wil fire on us. They'll wipe us out.'

'Perhaps they are just biding their time. They could start wiping us out at any moment.'

The Brigadier conceded the point, 'You're right. Now, I don't know my Martian military history, but I know that on this planet many a battle has been lost because the superior force got complacent. They don't realise just how hard we can hit them. We also know that they won't be using the gas.'

Bambera nodded. 'We've had word from Strike Command: the Harriers are ready, and can be here in four minutes. There are anti-aircraft batteries at Spitalfields and St James Park.'

'Trap Two has a couple of artillery pieces,' the Corporal added.

Lethbridge-Stewart was fitting a radio earpiece. 'We stay in position. We do nothing to provoke the Martians. We sit this one out if we have to.'

***

Theo Ogilvy had done his best, and he told Xznaal as much. Without the Orbiter, the nearest telescope to Mars was the Hubble, circling the Earth. For the next three hours, its orbit kept it on the wrong side of the planet to face the alien's home world.

All his professional life, Ogilvy had taken careful measurements, analysed blips in line graphs and spectroscope readings. He'd studied sketch charts with all the majesty and grandeur of a dot-the-dots puzzle, gasped in awe at blurred photographs of white pinpricks against a black background. Astronomy was an odd science, one that saw men in tweed suits growing old staring up into the infinite, timeless night sky in the hope of fathoming how the universe was put together. Every night, he and tens of thousands of people like him would observe tiny coloured specks of light, sometimes forgetting that

every single one of those specks was large enough to swallow Earth and Mars without even noticing. There were sunspots wider than the diameter of the Earth on each and every pinprick in the sky.

He was a thirty-eight year old bachelor, and the first time he'd even flown in a plane was a trip to NASA three years ago, when he'd been appointed Mission Controller of Mars 97. He'd lived in Watford al his adult life. Now, an alien was forcing him, at gunpoint, to show it photographs of Mars. An eight-foot green reptile. But how could a cold-blooded creature survive in the sub-zero temperatures of Mars? How could anything even remotely resembling a human breathe nitrogen? Why would a creature from a low-gravity world evolve into such a powerful, muscular form? Ogilvy pushed al those questions to the back of his mind and concentrated on the task in hand. But despite being in the global nerve centre for Martian studies, the clearest image of the planet that he could manage to find was from tracking station 63 in Madrid. It showed a new feature in the atmosphere, a vast brown/red cloud.

'M-massive displacement of material,' Ogilvy stammered, not daring to look at Xznaal. 'Mil ions of tonnes of rock and sand. Like the aftermath of a volcanic eruption. After Krakatoa, thousands of square miles were covered in ash, and the whole world had spectacular sunsets for years afterwards.'

He glanced over at Xznaal, who was almost hunched. The Martian's head was low, the crown it had been wearing had fallen off, and the only sign that it was still alive was the regular, asthmatic breathing.

'Ssunssetss?' it coughed.

Xznaal was pulling itself straight. It resembled a JCB or a similar piece of machinery - so much power, in such a hard body. Xznaal's claws snapped open and shut, a gesture of powerlessness that Ogilvy found disturbingly human.

'I... ' Ogilvy couldn't think of a single thing to say and turned to David Staines for support, but the Home Secretary had vanished. Lord Greyhaven's broken body was stil there. Ogilvy tried to form a smile, even a weak one, but couldn't. He tried to say some consoling words, but none came out.

Xznaal was staring into the monitor again. Then it turned, and lumbered from the room. Ogilvy swallowed, waiting until the Martian was out of sight, then he began running for the fire exit.

***

There was a scream from the crowd.

'Now what?' Bambera scowled.

The two Brigadiers turned back to the Space Museum. At the bottom of the steps was a Martian. Even at Allen Road, the Brigadier had only seen the enemy as he was running from it, or shrouded in darkness. All he knew was that they were heavily armoured, like an armadillo or a rhino, and that they were big. In broad daylight, standing there, the Martian lost none of its majesty, indeed it looked even more powerful. Everyone in the crowd was wild-eyed, they were clambering over each other to get a look.

The Brigadier unclipped his radio. 'This is Greyhound to al Traps. Hold your fire. Repeat: Hold fire.'

'Is that the leader?' Bambera asked.

'Yes,' Helmond said quietly. 'Xznaal.' She was terrified that it would see her, even across the crowded square. The Brigadier looked from the single Martian to the thousands of civilians. They were watching the alien with awe, all of them aware that this was the most important thing that they would ever see. They were mere footnotes in history, witnesses, not instigators and whatever else they did, wherever else they went, this was the defining moment of their lives. None of them were important. For wel over a full minute, the great mass of people were almost deathly quiet.

The Martian didn't move, it stood there like a great, old tree or a statue hewn from a block of jade.

Below it, the crowd was shifting around, rustling like leaves. Some news was spreading among them.

'The warship's moving,' someone - a civilian or a soldier, Alistair didn't know - announced.

Alistair spun around. The metal sky to the East was turning slowly and drifting forwards. All around them, UNIT

radios squawked as the spotters around London began relaying the news. The Brigadier checked his watch.

'The refinery?' Bambera asked.

'Why wait until now?' he replied. 'It's been nearly ten minutes.'

'Then that means... '

The warship was heading towards them, there was no doubt about it. The two Brigadiers were looking at each other, hoping the other would think of something to do.

The warship eclipsed the afternoon sun over Trafalgar Square.

Below them, the crowd fell quiet.

As darkness dropped, the silence swept through the crowd like a Mexican wave. Alistair watched, and felt the mood change. From his vantage point, he could see it all, the high spirits had become darker. A group of young men were fighting each other in front of Dillons. The crowd were pulling back from the Space Museum, some were trying to get away, and they jostled with those who were transfixed, watching the sky. One spark and this crowd would erupt into terrible violence.

Xznaal stood there, watching them too.

The warship had stopped, its prow hanging over the Space Museum, the vast mass of the ship hanging over London and disappearing over the horizon.

The Martian lifted its slablike foot, the first movement that it had made.

The warship was blotting out the sun, making everything else around it irrelevant.

Xznaal swung forward, those broad shoulders slouching, its eyes turned blankly to the ground.

Far from the Martian the first bottle arced into the air. It dashed against the pavement, scattering the crowd where it fel . Voices were being raised again.

The Terran gravity was taking its toll. Xznaal was like a medieval knight in a suit of armour. Clad in a chain mail vest and plate armour weighing as much as he did, even a knight in prime condition had been unable to fight for long. Many falling on their face into the mud

of a battlefield would find that they didn't have the strength to pul themselves back up. The weight of their armour would drag them down and they would drown.

Xznaal took another step.

On the other side of the Square, there was a great crashing sound, shouts of surprise. The crowd had uprooted a lamppost. A fight had started, a small incident at the base of Nelson's Column. It was impossible to see who was fighting. As members of the crowd realised that there wasn't anything to stop them: no police, no army, no laws, the violence spread like fire. Within seconds the crowd was a seething mass of flailing arms, rising and falling.

With a great, rol ing clank, a panel on the underside of the warship was grinding open.

The crowd were pushing against the crash barriers, right in front of Trap One. The metal fence was buckling, scraping against the tarmac.

The crash barriers toppled, the front row of the crowd falling with them. Like a dam had burst, a seething mass of humanity surged through the gaps in the barrier. Men were clawing their way over children, women were punching and kicking their way to the front. The noise. Ten thousand shouts and screams and cries, al merging into a monster voice.

'They're going to kill us!'

'Run!'

'Got to get out of here.'

Lethbridge-Stewart turned to his men. 'Let them through. Try to help the injured,' he bellowed.

But it was the best that his men could do to stand their ground. They were trained in crowd control techniques, the subtle and not so subtle ways that a man in a uniform could manipulate a mass of people. None of the crowd were thinking, they only wanted to get away. So the UNIT men did the thinking for them, channel ing them off into three or four columns, slowing them down, spreading them out. Other troops were clearing the bottlenecks, pulling the injured clear or making room for them.

The Brigadier was trying to keep track of the whole scene, from the

activity of the warship to the dynamics of the crowd. It was an impossible task.

'Something moving up there.'

As he looked up, a young woman collided with Lethbridge-Stewart, almost bringing them both down. She was already on her way. He peered up, trying to catch his breath.

'It's the platform,' he called out. 'That lift thing. It'll be heading for Xznaal.'

The disc was dropping slowly but inexorably.

Bambera appeared at his side, the shoulder of her uniform jacket ripped. 'This could be our last chance to take him out.'

The Brigadier shook his head. 'The Martians would retaliate,' he called.

The platform had dropped below head-height. Xznaal was still visible, towering over the crowd. The Martian mounted the platform, a laborious movement.

The radio squawked. 'Trap Two to Greyhound. There's a mob of people heading for the Tower, sir. They're throwing bottles and stones at the Government troops. They'll... sir, there's gunfire. Both sides.'

The two Brigadiers looked over at each other. The sound of the shots was drifting across London.

Behind them, the magnetic platform was rising again.

'Prepare to move out,' Bambera shouted to her men. They began pulling back to the Land Rovers. A pretty young lieutenant opened a car door for Lethbridge-Stewart.

'Sir,' one of the radio operators called back before he could get in. 'The spotters at Brentford report an aircraft.

Unknown design, travelling at supersonic speeds. It looks Martian.'

They could hear it, cutting a swathe through the air. Lethbridge-Stewart swung his binoculars around. A large V-wing craft was approaching from the West. 'The Martian shuttlecraft.'

'The mountain has come to Mohammed, Alistair Gordon Lethbridge-

Stewart.'

The Brigadier turned. There was a young man, wearing a duffle coat and long scarf, and behind him was an overweight chap about the same age. The old soldier narrowed his eyes. 'Who the devil are you?'

'My name's Oswald. I've been working in London during the Occupation. Sending information out over the Net. I know what's going on.'

'Thank God someone does,' Bambera muttered.

Oswald ignored her. 'The Martians have transported the gas from Reading in the shuttle.'

The Brigadier paled. 'We've been assuming that the only way to get the gas to London was using the warship. We didn't count on them transporting it in the shuttle. It's heading for the Tower.'

Bambera was wide-eyed. 'So Ford's team failed? Now the Martians have the gas?'

'Yes.'

Lethbridge-Stewart was reaching into his jacket pocket. He handed Oswald a small card.

'Mr Oswald, could you do me a favour? This is my wife's business card. It has her email address. Could you send her a message? Tell her that I love her. Thank you.'

Oswald took the card and nodded. Lethbridge-Stewart shook his hand and hurried into his staff car.

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Extract from the memoirs of Professor Bernice Summerfield

The doorway at the front of the shuttlecraft gave a pneumatic sigh and parted. The shuttle had landed on Tower Green, right in the centre of the Tower of the London. It was a flat lawn, surrounded by two towered curtain walls.

Beyond the millennium-old defences, I could hear chaos: shouting, even sporadic gunfire.

I began to step down the ramp. My wrists had been tied together with steel wire. It would have been an uncomfortable binding for an Ice Warrior but to me, without the benefit of chitinous wristguards, it was agonising.

Vrgnur, my captor, wasn't following me down.

As I made my way down into the afternoon sun, I could see Xznaal waiting, standing alone in the middle of the green. He had just stepped from that magnetic disc of his. Provisional Government troops, wearing their ordinary Army uniforms were manning the battlements. There were snipers on the ramparts, ducked behind the merlons.

Beyond the walls I could hear sporadic gunfire. Down on Tower Green I was sheltered from the bullets. Medics scurried along into place, ready for casualties. It wasn't a battlefield yet, but it would be. It was reverse-archaeology: instead of scraping away the layers of history, these people would soon be adding to them and centuries from now, someone would be cataloguing the bul etholes in the walls, unearthing cartridges and dropped jewellery. Becoming excited when they found an intact skull. But the archaeologist wouldn't be human, or Martian, and they wouldn't be studying a living race.

The warship hung above it all. It was the first time I had seen it in daylight. This was a Warbringer, used in former times as flying fortresses during the longest and most bloody crusades and military campaigns. Although its gunports were open, there was no sign that the sonic cannons had been used or that they were about to be.

'Good afternoon, Professssor,' Xznaal gasped.

'Good afternoon. I am sorry to hear of your loss.' I uttered a short Martian prayer of lamentation. The original had been carved in the wal of a deep shelter during the Thousand-Day War, probably with the tip of a Martian claw.

Xznaal exhaled slowly, a sound like a sigh. 'I ssensse that you mean what you ssay.' He sounded weary, but not broken. He spoke in English.

'Is there any more news from Mars?' I asked him.

'None.'

I couldn't feel sorry for him. I pictured the gal eries and tunnels

shattering, fragments of rock the size of houses raining on the subterranean cities of the Argyre. I could hear a whole planet screaming as the ground began to tremble. Crystal statues splintering, women and eggs being crushed, a population running and screaming and dying, million-year old temples flattened. But I couldn't feel sorry for Xznaal himself. I tried to rub my wrists where they were particularly sore.

As I reached the lawn, the shuttle's door hissed shut, sealing Vrgnur inside.

'Take tea with me,' Xznaal ordered. I nodded, taking my position at the side of the Martian Lord as he lumbered away from the shuttle. I've always been tall for a human, particularly a woman, but my eyes only came level with Xznaal's chest. I looked down at the Martian's legs. Great box-like sections of dark shel parted and drew together as his feet lifted and fell. My own body seemed frail and withered by comparison. I felt like a child walking beside a grown-up.

We walked up the Green towards a low stone plinth. It was almost certainly all that remained of a long-demolished building, or a monument to an otherwise forgotten hero. A very large, flat tray sat atop it, jostling with a silver tea service. Iced tea, naturally.

'Shall I be mother?' I asked, climbing up. I moved the teapot aside and discovered a patch of green paint. 'Er... this wouldn't be the original Haywain, would it?'

'I grew bored of it. Thiss way it sservess a practical purposse.'

'Martians are not a race to waste anything.'

'No.' I poured two cups of tea and spilt about three more, not bad going considering my wrists were tied together.

Xznaal hadn't kil ed me. Normally, this would be good news, but I had learnt over the years that when megalomaniacs don't kill you straight away it's because they plan to kil you horribly a little way down the line, once they'd assembled suitable kil ing equipment. I was unsure whether I was expected to conduct a conversation with my captor. I began by asking Xznaal why I hadn't been killed yet.

'You vanquisshed a Martian warrior in ssingle combat,' the Martian whispered. There was a tone of respect in his voice. Megalomaniacs were also the only people in the whole, wide universe that used words like "vanquished" in everyday conversation.

'Er, yes. It's not something I'm terribly proud of.' But if it meant that Xznaal respected me...

'You desserve an honourable death. An execution.'

I nodded my head. 'Do I get to choose the method?'

Xznaal cackled. 'An exquissite idea.' He sucked some more air. 'How do you wissh to die, human?'

I made a show of looking around. My eye caught a wooden block and an axe. There was a little plaque: 111

"The axe which is of the Tudor Period, was for long displayed at the Tower as the instrument of Anne Boleyn's death, although in fact by her own choice she was beheaded with a sword. The block was made for the last beheading on Tower Hill in 1747."

The trouble was, I didn't fancy the idea of beheading, however it was done. Nor gassing, stabbing, hanging, shooting, electrocution, lethal injection or strangulation. Dying was an irredeemably unpleasant idea.

'I choose "old age",' I announced final y.

Xznaal seemed disappointed by the answer, as I had expected. Before one could join the Amalgamated Union of Villains, Baddies and Miscel aneous Evil Persons one had to abandon any sense of humour.

The Martian Lord drew breath. 'From ssome of the implementss on dissplay in thiss fort, I knew that your race truly iss ingeniouss when it comess to the artss of death.'

I thanked him, already knowing that Xznaal wouldn't be able to pick up on my tone of voice.

'The concept of "torture", for example iss - '

I yawned. It had reached that stage in the proceedings.

Xznaal cocked his head.

'The Victorians exaggerated all that,' I informed him. 'There aren't quite as many dungeons and torture chambers here as they would have you believe.'

'I know that,' Xznaal replied, 'but thiss iss sstill the place where many

human nobless were executed. The Princess in the Tower, Lady Jane Grey... '

I was impressed by the level of the Martian's research, and told him as much. He accepted the compliment.

Behind us, silently, the Martian shuttle began rising into the air. It passed overhead, arcing up towards the warship.

A hatch was opening up to welcome it. Neither Martian ship seemed concerned by the prospect of a surface-to-air attack, and none came.

Xznaal watched the two vessels converging in silence. The shuttlecraft rotated on one of its axes, rising the last few metres into the body of the warship. Above it, hydraulic clamps rattled out of their housings and locked into place. I realised that I needed to keep talking to Xznaal.

'How goes the battle?' I asked after a slightly awkward moment.

Xznaal licked his lips, the Martian equivalent of a smile. 'The human ressisstance forcess are brave, their tacticss show intel igence.'

'But they don't have the firepower to get in here and they don't stand a chance against the warship?'

'No.'

' "It's bows and arrows against the lightning, anyhow," ' I said in an attempt at a Cockney accent.

Xznaal looked down at me.

'A quotation from an Earth book,' I told him, although I didn't tel him which one. He didn't seem to care. 'Why aren't you using the sonic cannons?' I asked.

'They are unnecessssary.'

'Because you are going to use the gas?'

'Yess. Watch.'

As I cricked my neck upwards, the warship was beginning to rise.

'It will ssoon reach ten kilometress, the altitude for optimum dissperssion. Commander!'

A human army officer ran to Xznaal's side, saluting as he came. He looked at me as though I was something he'd stepped in.

'Issssue your men with gass masksss,' the Martian ordered.

'Your Majesty.' The soldier saluted, hurrying away.

'As I understand it,' I said, 'gas masks won't protect those men.'

Xznaal gurgled. 'No. They wil perissh. The Red Death will hunt them down. Imagine their terror when they realisse their fate. That while they thought they were protected, they are in fact helplessss.' His tongue was flickering over his fangs.

I found it easy to remain calm. Panicking wouldn't save the Earth, and it wouldn't save me. 'Is that honourable?'

'It iss a ssimple matter of retribution. Gerayhavunn desstroyed my clan, I sshal desstroy hiss.'

'Balls,' I said, stopping in my tracks. 'You were producing that gas a week ago, and it was already on its way to London when the nuke went off. You're a thug, a bul y, not a warrior.'

Xznaal pitched around, stooping over me. 'Hisstory shall be the judge of that,' he growled.

'Who's history, Xznaal?' I shouted back. 'Your dead planet's or mine?'

Xznaal glowered at me. 'The time hass come for you to die,' he announced.

I put down my teacup. 'Executing me won't solve anything.'

'Not jusst you, Professor Ssummerfield. Your race. The time hass come for humanity to die.'

End of extract

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'She's talking to it.'

The Brigadier adjusted the focus of his binoculars. Professor Summerfield was dwarfed by the Martian Lord. The two of them were strol ing along a footpath, engaged in what looked like a polite conversation. Around the Tower was a mass of people, crashing

against the walls like a stormy sea. The Brigadier turned his binoculars on sections of the crowd.

Bottles and stones were being thrown at the Tower, but the moat and the high walls prevented any of them from getting inside. So, the brunt of the anger was focused on the tanks of the Provisional Government. Rows of riot police were holding firm as missiles clattered against their plastic shields. Behind the front ranks of police were more heavily-armed units: water cannons, mounted units, even tanks. It wouldn't take much more provocation before they were wheeled out. Some of the Provisional security forces had machine guns. This could become a massacre, and there was little the Royalists could do.

There was a young man propped halfway up a lamp-post, goading other young men in the crowd. There was nowhere for them to take their anger.

'I want some thoughts about how we get into the Tower without the use of air power,' Lethbridge-Stewart said. The walls had stood for centuries, but every so often an army or a mob had managed to get in there: it had happened during the Peasants' Revolt and the Wars of the Roses. These days in normal circumstances, if such a term could ever be used, a couple of SAS or other Special Forces squads would abseil down from helicopters, or parachute in. With the Martian warship there, and the Provisional Government intent to enforce the no-fly rule, the helicopters would never make it to London.

'That ship on the opposite bank... ' Corporal Baxter began.

'The HMS Belfast,' Bambera said, 'what of it?'

'Wel do you think those guns are in working condition?'

One of the Captains sniggered.

'You have something to add?' Lethbridge-Stewart asked him.

'No sir.' The Captain looked straight ahead, discipline restored.

'You know for a fact that the guns won't fire?' the Brigadier continued.

'No, sir.'

'Then do something constructive, Captain, find out.'

The Captain saluted and left the room.

A young lieutenant had her hand clamped over a telephone receiver. 'I'm trying to contact some of the Beefeaters.

They're all retired soldiers, and until last week they lived within the walls. Every one of them resigned rather than serve the Martians. My betting is that some of them might know about a secret passage, or a way under the walls via the sewers or the Tube.'

'Good work.' Lethbridge-Stewart turned to the others. 'What about a direct assault?'

One of the soldiers handed around copies of a glossy tourist brochure, requisitioned from the official Tower gift shop. There was a detailed black and white aerial view of the Tower and its walls.

'Three entrances,' Bambera said.

'Four,' Lethbridge-Stewart corrected, pointing at Traitor's Gate. It was set low into the wal , facing directly onto the Thames. 'We might be able to lead an assault from the river,' Bambera mused.

'There would be heavy losses,' the Brigadier responded.

'Professor Summerfield just isn't worth the sacrifice.' No-one said it, but everyone was thinking it.

'What's the spaceship doing?' Lethbridge-Stewart asked without looking away.

'Holding its position,' Bambera replied. 'Wait. It's rising!'

It was getting lighter outside. Sunlight began to stream over Tower Hill.

'Look at this, Doug! I've got the Brig's email address, I've got his home phone number. What's this? BN45 7ED.

I've got his smegging postcode!' Oswald could barely contain his excitement. He was waving the business card like it was a winning lottery ticket.

'The ship's moving,' Doug noted.

Oswald wasn't listening. 'I could get more for this than that box full of FHMs I bought last April. This is worth more than my autographed copy of The Killing Stone.'

'Yeah, but you'll have to sel it fast. The ship's moving.'

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Extract from the memoirs of Professor Bernice Summerfield

I glanced up. Although it had been making its ascent for a good few minutes, the Martian ship was still filling the sky. When I turned back to Xznaal, he was studying a holographic display that hung level with his head. I could see the mob outside, baying for blood. Rocks and bottles were being thrown at a line of Provisional Government troops.

'Gunnery officer,' Xznaal grunted. 'Fire.'

For a moment I couldn't connect the words with what I was seeing. I looked up again. The Martian ship looked like a gravestone.

And then the sky pulsed.

My teeth were rattling, my ears were ringing. A globule of sonic energy slammed down through the air, impacting the ground on Tower Hil . Not the ground. It had hit the heart of the crowd. I could hear them screaming over the sound of a hundred burglar alarms.

Xznaal gave a wheezing laugh.

'Fire!' he barked.

A second blast fell just the other side of the walls, right on the banks of the Thames. There was a geyser of hot mud, a column of steam that shot fifty feet into the air. And, of course, there was screaming.

'Both planets could survive, Xznaal,' I insisted. 'You have the power to end this war.'

He turned to me, and growled words that sent a chill down my spine. 'I don't want to end the war. I want to win.'

'At any cost?'

He cocked his head to one side. He hadn't understood the question. I

tried to put it another way. 'If, when this is over, there are two Martians, but only one human alive, wil you have won?'

Xznaal lifted his head. I saw him standing where he was now, bathed in moonlight in the ruins of London, mist on the ground, the sky icy blue. His heavy claws were raised in triumph. The image was so strong, so familiar, that try as I might, I couldn't see it ending any other way. I was crying even before he had given his answer. I was only human, after all.

'That would be victory,' the Martian concluded.

End of extract

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'They are firing on the crowd. We need an air strike,' Bambera declared. Before she had finished speaking, there was another banshee wail, another tremor as a sonic blast hit home.

'We need a miracle,' the Brigadier replied, reaching for his radio. 'And this is our last chance to make one happen.

Greyhound to Eagle. Launch.'

***

Extract from the memoirs of Professor Bernice Summerfield

Xznaal grabbed the back of my head and forced it down onto the block. I turned my head as far as I could without breaking my neck. The axe was in his other claw.

'That's a two-handed axe,' I told him. 'Don't I get a last request? Can I call my lawyer? At least let me compose some famous last words. Sorry to babble on a bit, but if this is - as I believe it to be - "it" and I'm going to die, then I'd like to spend my last twenty seconds on this Earth swearing and generally kicking up a fuss about how unfair this all is and how I'm too young to die.'

I resolved to keep my eyes open.

Then there was the whisper.

'It ends now, Xznaal.'

The soft voice had come from all around us: echoing from the walls of

the Tower, rumbling like thunder in the distant mountains. The Ice Lord was looking around, trying to locate the source of the voice.

'Who are you?' Xznaal hissed. 'Sshow yoursself. Identify yoursself.'

'I am the man that gives monsters nightmares.'

I frowned. It was a loudspeaker, a public address system of some kind. The second time the voice had spoken it had been at a normal volume.

'The Daleks cal me the Bringer of Darkness.'

I couldn't begin to work out where the voice was coming from. It was getting louder, reaching a crescendo.

'I am the Eighth Man Bound.'

Something was glittering, coalescing in the air over Tower Bridge. A face.

'I am the Champion of Life and Time.'

A long, angular face with a jutting chin and aristocratic nose, framed by a mane of brown hair.

'I'm the guy with two hearts.'

Thousand-year-old eyes and a child-like expression gazed down at us, smiling angelically.

'I make history better.'

There was a pause that contained worlds and histories immeasurable to man. Then four words, each one louder than the last, each one drowning out the noise of the wind and the battle.

'I... '

My eyes were watering.

'Am... '

The Brigadier lowered his binoculars, his eyes wide.

'The Doctor!'

And it was.

End of extract

Chapter Fifteen

Going Down in History

Extract from the memoirs of Professor Bernice Summerfield

I tried to bring my breathing back under control. The Doctor was a hologram, twenty feet high, his hands behind his back. Xznaal had turned to face this vast apparition, which peered down at the Martian Warlord like a parent disciplining a naughty child.

And there was someone pulling me away from the block. Alexander Christian. He put a finger to his lip. Only my hands had been tied, and once I was upright I could hurry away under my own steam. I followed Christian towards the cover between two buildings. According to one of the signs we passed, we were heading to 'The Jewel House'.

Behind us, the Doctor's voice was rumbling again, fil ing the air.

'I am in your warship. Come and face me if you dare.'

The Martian Lord was straining to look up at the ship.

Eve Waugh and Alan were waiting for us. I hesitated. A mass murderer and the two people that had betrayed the Doctor to the Martians. But why trap me like this, when the merest moment before Xznaal had been able to deliver the kil ing blow? Besides, Christian would never work for the Martians. These people were on my side, and there was a wall between us and Xznaal. I gazed out over Tower Green, saw the Doctor's grinning face filling the sky.

Eve had a small pair of wirecutters, and she was snipping through the bindings on my wrist, one strand at a time.

Lex Christian was reloading his pistols, with the help of Alan.

'It's not a trick is it?' I asked the American journalist.

'No,' Eve laughed. 'That's him. He got aboard this morning when they were loading up supplies.'

I could picture the Doctor ducked behind a stack of crates, smuggling himself onto the magnetic lift platform.

Sneaking around the Martian ship, avoiding patrols, opening up inspection hatches.

'But ... how?'

'When the Martians attacked your house, we only just made it out alive.' I decided that under the circumstances it would be churlish to point out that Eve had been the one who had tipped off the Martians in the first place. The last of the bindings fell away.

Another sonic blast detonated. Masonry and glass crashed. It had hit a building, then, rather than the crowd.

'We headed back down to Adisham, but there was this terrible cloud.'

I nodded, rubbing the circulation back into my hands.

Eve continued. 'We could tell straight away that the cloud was being controlled somehow. Alan was filming it, and it was seeking out people, killing them stone dead. Then we saw the Doctor.'

They'd got to the part of the story that I didn't know about.

'He was breaking into a shop with the sonic screwdriver. It turned out later that he was trying to save a cat who had got trapped. The cloud caught sight of him, and it was like a shark scenting blood. It kind of drew itself together and poured into the shop after him. We fol owed, and we found that the Doctor was standing there, with the gas swirling around him like a hurricane. He looked so calm, so collected, and then the cloud leapt at him, smothering him, pouring into his mouth and nose. It was horrible.'

Her voice was matter-of-fact, and there was no indication that she had been horrified, or had felt anything at al .

This was a woman whose job it was to report horrible things on a daily basis.

'As the last of the gas entered his body, the Doctor col apsed. Alan knows first aid, and he tried to help him, but there was no pulse and he was already cold to the touch. The Doctor had shut down everything that kept him alive: respiration, heartbeat, brain activity, lindal gland, reflex response. Apparently Time Lords can do that.'

'It was the bit after that I wasn't too sure about,' I informed her. 'The happy ending aspect.'

Another sonic blast hit the Thames, sending up a jet of steam. It was almost certainly the first shot that hadn't killed people. As the ship continued its ascent, we were getting more notice of the attacks - there was perhaps a two second delay between the sound of the blast coming and it hitting the ground.

'The Doctor had worked out that the cloud had been programmed to seek and kill him. When the gas detected no life signs, the program was complete, the gas had no other purpose and it deactivated.'

'Yes,' I said slowly, pointing over at the hologram, 'but this overlooks one small detail... '

Eve brightened. 'Well it was lucky for him that we were there. Alan kept trying, and managed to resuscitate him.'

'Only because of that Time Lord constitution of his,' Alan called over. 'No human could have survived being dead that long. As it was it took him a couple of days to fully recover. We had to smuggle him out of Adisham in the back of Eve's car.'

'Gosh,' I said. 'How's the cat?'

'It made it,' Eve assured me. 'We got back to London and met up with Lex there.'

I frowned. 'So, with the greatest respect, what has the Doctor been doing for the last week?' Al this time, people had been dying, the country had been in a state of civil war and the Doctor hadn't even shown his face.

'Working to end the invasion,' Eve replied indignantly. 'He spent the first few days trying to find an antidote for the Martian gas. There isn't one. We went to Gatwick, freed hundreds of prisoners. We have no idea what the Martians were planning for them.'

I shuddered, remembering the tests conducted at the refinery in Reading.

'Xznaal's moving,' Alan called over.

End of extract

115

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'T minus three minutes,' one of the lieutenants called from behind them. The Brigadier barely heard him. He was at the bottom of the stairs now, and he could see the crowd massed outside. It was a riot out there: windows had been smashed, cars overturned and set alight.

Another bolt of energy slammed home. The building shook, but the impact itself had been further away than the last, on the other side of the Tower. Hopefully the crowd was thinner over there. Ambulances were wailing their way across London, now.

There was something rising into the air from inside the Tower.

'It's Xznaal,' he called out. 'Snipers - '

The Brigadier didn't finish the sentence. The sky pulsed.

'Take cov-'

The blast of energy slammed into the building behind him. Every pane of glass in the block shattered, the supporting walls burst open. The Brigadier grabbed Bambera and tugged her down, then pulled his hands over his head. They were thrown forwards, masonry and glass crashing around them.

Lethbridge-Stewart's earpiece crackled. 'T minus two minutes.' He could hear the words, so he was alive.

He pul ed himself up, coughing and laughing. 'That was a close one. Is everyone OK?'

As the brick dust began to settle, he could make out Bambera on her hands and knees, shaking debris from her hair. Standing behind her were half a dozen soldiers, with machine guns.

They weren't his men. They were Provisional Government troops.

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The hatchway dilated closed, and Xznaal stepped from the lift platform into the main hold. He had spent a week in the Tower, with its crude human attempts to replicate the temperature and humidity of Mars. The genuine Martian atmosphere tasted odd: too dry, not rich enough. It was dark here, dul Martian lighting simulating the conditions of his native world, and also the paucity of its energy reserves. Al around were silos and cylinders full of raw materials brought from refineries and mines the length and breadth of this land.

With the wealth of the Earth he could have rebuilt the Argyre. The diseases that racked the bodies and minds of his people would have been cured, there would have been food and fuel for all. He pictured Mars how it might have been: dry fountains running with water again, the zoos and parks teeming with life.

The ceiling above him clattered. The hold of the Martian ship was vast, large enough to contain the plunder from an entire military campaign. The pressurised vessel took up the entire roofspace. The Red Death was inside, impatient to start its work, possessed of an overwhelming urge to be released. Xznaal listened to the glorious sound, imagining the moment when he would pul the lever that freed the gas, the action that would destroy all human life. First he would destroy the Doctor.

He realised that the warship's cannons had been silent since he had stepped aboard.

'Gunnery officer, why have you stopped firing?' he barked into the air.

Something darted outside the chamber, behind the glass door. It was impossible to see it clearly. The door retracted.

Standing framed in the doorway, bathed in red light, was the Doctor. He resembled a human male, with a long, shaggy mane of fur. According to al the legends, the Time Lords were able to select their physical frame. Why did the Doctor wear such a body, when he could choose the most magnificent armour, or a form that glittered or shone like gemstones?

'Well, it might be something to do with this.' The Doctor tossed over a crystalline ball. Xznaal caught it, seeing that there was a delicate mechanism at the globe's core. It took the Martian a few seconds to identify the device as the main processor of the gunnery computer. The Gallifreyan's face was twisted so that his teeth were bared. Vrgnur was behind him. But Xznaal's scientist was not the Doctor's captor, rather his stance resembled that of a bodyguard.

The Martian Lord drew in a deep breath. 'Vrgnur, what is the meaning of this treachery?'

In his paw, the Doctor was holding a small holocamera, the device he had used to project his image. He put that device in the pouch of his robe as he began walking the length of the room over to Xznaal. Inside its storage vessel, the Red Death began scattering around, excited by the new arrival. Xznaal could hear it scratching and

clawing at the wal s of its prison.

The Doctor glanced up the storage tank lining the ceiling before brandishing a small codex. 'I've made some calculations.' He opened up the cover and began leafing through the pages of handwritten notes. 'I even got your scientist here to check my working.'

'And what are your conclusions?' Xznaal growled.

Vrgnur stepped forwards. 'Lord Xznaal, the Doctor is a scientist of great skill. His calculations confirm the results of the tests that I conducted on soil and water samples from Adisham. They show that the Red Death hunts all Terran DNA, not just that of the humans.'

Xznaal grunted his satisfaction.

'If we were to release enough of the Red Death to wipe out the human race, it would eradicate the entire Terran biosphere,' Vrgnur concluded.

'The weapon is more effective than first we thought. Excellent. Shall we test your hypothesis?' He reached for the release control.

The Doctor whirled to face the Martian Lord, his arms flailing. 'Once it has finished feeding, Earth wil be a barren rock, without even the smallest bacteria in the soil or microbe in the air. The Death wil have consumed even itself.'

'I care little for life on Earth.' Xznaal hissed, baring fangs glistening with saliva.

'You've lost control of the Earth, so you destroy it?' the Doctor shouted. 'That's the behaviour of the playground, not the parade ground. You're not a warrior, Xznaal, you're a spoilt child.'

The Martian's claw snatched the release control.

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The man in front of Lethbridge-Stewart was surely too young to have been a real general, despite the uniform.

There were six soldiers with him, eager young types.

'I am General Maybury-Hil , commanding officer of the government

security forces,' he announced. 'I offer you the unconditional surrender of myself and al my men.'

The general handed over his machine gun. The Brigadier rubbed his moustache. 'Accepted,' he said finally.

'I will, of course, take full responsibility for my actions and those under my command. We will place ourselves under - '

Lethbridge-Stewart held up his hand. 'With the greatest respect, General, you will do no such thing. What you and your men wil do is open the gates of the Byward and Middle Tower and you will do it in the next thirty seconds.

Step to it!'

Maybury-Hil saluted and hurried away to find a walkie-talkie.

Bambera watched him go. 'Technically, sir, he does outrank you.'

The Brigadier pulled the bolt on the machine gun he had been handed. 'Technically, Winifred, I'm retired.'

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'No,' Vrgnur called, lifting his arm to block Xznaal's.

The Martian Lord was stronger than his scientist. Xznaal brushed him aside. Vrgnur responded by raising his claw and firing at his Lord.

The Doctor shoved into Vrgnur, barely budging the Martian, but throwing off his aim. The energy bolt struck the floor, blowing open a large hole. Bare electrical wire was exposed, and began sparking.

'This isn't the way,' he shouted, turning to Xznaal, ready to talk to him. The Martian Lord's claw was raised, aiming his sonic disruptor squarely at them. The Doctor threw himself down to the deck as Xznaal fired. A glob of sonic energy streaked over him, slammed into the wal , shattering a chrome pipe. A stream of liquid gushed out, catching Vrgnur on the shoulder. Instinctively, the scientist turned, and the fluid was al over his face and torso.

With horror, the Doctor realised that the cylinder was full of liquid nitrogen.

Vrgnur's carapace was creaking. A crack had appeared. His legs and arms were untouched by the liquid, but they gave way. With each

movement, a new gash was being rent in the Ice Warrior's armour. The Martian howled a scream, a terrible, almost electronic, sound. His final act was to raise his own claw, to aim it at his Lord.

'No, Vrgnur!' the Doctor cal ed, but it was too late.

The sonic energy ran up the frozen chitin of the Martian's arm, and the spiky armour burst open one segment after the other. The Doctor watched with horrified fascination. The molecular structure of the armour had become brittle, almost crystalline as a result of the freezing process. Vrgnur lurched, his Martian constitution keeping him alive even as the liquid nitrogen and sonic reaction reached his vital organs. He was gasping for breath, but each mouthful of air burst open the solidifying mazelike structures of his lungs.

The Doctor narrowed his eyes, trying to think of just one way that he could help the scientist. But there was nothing he could do. Vrgnur crashed over like a fallen tree. For a moment his remaining arm twitched, the claw clasping and unclasping. Around him, the liquid nitrogen was evaporating into patches of white mist.

Xznaal and the Doctor stood over the corpse, watching each other warily.

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Extract from the memoirs of Professor Bernice Summerfield

The Brigadier hurried across Tower Green towards me. He had a machine gun slung over his soldier, and a squad of UNIT men behind him.

'Xznaal's going to release the gas once the warship is ten kilometres up. The Doctor's on-board.' I explained.

'Yes I know.'

'T minus one minute,' Bambera said. 'If you're going to abort the air-strike, you'll have to do it now.'

The Brigadier peered up at the ship. 'It's stopped firing.'

I brightened. 'The Doctor must be in control up there. Cal off the attack.'

Lethbridge-Stewart nodded slowly. 'I think you're right.' He unclipped

his radio. 'Greyhound to Eagle. Hold your fire.

Await further orders.'

End of extract

117

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The Doctor was looking up at the vast metal tank again, clearly in awe. The vast tank above him clattered.

'Lord Xznaal,' the intercom barked, 'we have reached the optimum altitude for dispersion.'

Xznaal maintained his position at the release controls, but he didn't pull the lever, not yet. Instead he stabbed at the control that opened the inspection hatches. The metal panels rolled back, revealing the Red Death. It boiled and bubbled like a giant kettle or a witch's cauldron. Eyes and fangs were forming in there, barbed limbs and spines the size of telegraph poles. It hissed and popped and wheezed. It growled and snarled and grunted. Limbs and appendages sprouted and withered as it tried and failed to find a break in the vessel that kept it contained.

The Doctor was standing alongside him.

'It is a thing of beauty,' Xznaal shouted over the din. 'Does it scare you?'

The Doctor turned to the Martian, and without saying a word he stretched out his paw and held it up against the glass. For the first time, the Red Death withdrew, frightened of what it had discovered.

'I've gazed into the abyss already, Xznaal, and the abyss gazed into me. It fled from what it saw. Monsters who fight with me should take care.'

Xznaal lurched at him, al owing the Doctor plenty of time to pull back. Xznaal swiped again, an inch from the Doctor's face this time. The Martian wheezed with pleasure, his jaws opening wide.

'You have lost, Time Lord. This precious Earth will die, al the human animals wil die.'

'No,' The Doctor replied simply.

In a lesser lifeform it would be stupidity, but here it was the legendary Time Lord arrogance. Before the Doctor died, he would have to be taught humility. Xznaal opened his claws and began to advance. The Doctor stood his ground as the Martian loomed over him, his tiny form framed by the writhing mass of the Red Death above him.

Xznaal found it apt that a creature as brave as the Doctor would meet his fate at the claws of one as noble as himself.

He reached out, placing a pincer delicately around either side of the Doctor's neck. The Doctor lifted his head slightly to accommodate the vast claw. And then Xznaal yanked the Time Lord ten feet into the air, slamming his head against the plate glass of the inspection hatch. The cloud shied away at first, but was soon beginning to gain in confidence. Tentatively, a tendril of red vapour inched towards the glass.

'Will you stop me?' Xznaal roared disdainful y.

The Doctor's squashy human face was pressed tight to the glass. He struggled to draw breath. 'No. I'm just a distraction. Something to keep you occupied.'

The intercom began barking. 'My Lord, a flock of human aerocraft are approaching. They are heavily armed and on a direct intercept course.'

A hologlobe materialised in front of Xznaal. He released his grip on the Doctor to study the display. There were three attack groups, al approaching from the west.

'Without its sonic cannons, this warship is a sitting duck, Xznaal,' the Doctor said, rubbing his throat.

The radio crackled. 'This is Brigadier Alistair Gordon Lethbridge-Stewart, commanding officer of the British forces to the Martian vessel. I have just received the unconditional surrender of the Provisional Government. Your occupation of our territory is over. I give you three minutes to withdraw your forces from British airspace or to signal your surrender. Lethbridge-Stewart out.'

Xznaal peered deep into the hologlobe. 'These Earth soldiers are weak,' he said, giving a great gurgling laugh.

'They have the chance to destroy me, yet they give me time enough to wipe them out. The Red Death will cleanse the Earth of human filth. It will feast on them, their women and their primate offspring. This vast

green world wil be scoured clean, its oceans and skies will be emptied. Humanity will die.'

He turned to face the Doctor, and found himself staring into the lens of a holocamera.

'You should never underestimate the power of public opinion,' the Doctor smiled, lowering the camera.

'Congratulations, King Xznaal, I think you've just made your abdication speech.'

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The giant hologram faded from the skies. All around, there was silence. The crowd were holding their breath.

'Commit,' said Lethbridge-Stewart.

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There was a deep rumbling explosion, far away. Then another, much nearer. Within seconds it had become a sustained assault, salvo after salvo hitting home. The warship might not have forcefields, but the armour-plating was several metres thick in places. Unless the RAF were very lucky, the first wave of the attack would weaken the superstructure of the warship rather than hit anything more vulnerable, like a power cable or the magnetic engines.

Here in the hold they were sheltered from the worst of the bombardment, but the lighting was flickering and the whole ship was lurching from one side to another. The intercom was crackling. However much of a pounding the warship took, Xznaal's men wouldn't move it without an express order from their Lord.

Xznaal had disappeared into the shadows. The Doctor peered into the gloom. He was sure that the Martian Lord wouldn't leave the Dispersion Chamber. Above him, the Red Death was straining inside its tank. The Doctor bounded over to the release controls, slipping the sonic screwdriver from his pocket.

'It's finished, Xznaal,' he shouted over the noise of another explosion. An adjustment to the sonic screwdriver made it into a welding tool. A couple of quick bursts from that, and the lever was jammed so tightly

that not even Martian strength would be able to move it.

The ship had stopped rocking. The first wave of the attack must be over, and there would be a brief respite for the warship as the Harriers arced around at not-quite-supersonic speeds ready to attack again.

Suddenly Xznaal was in front of him, emerging from a column of choking black smoke and filling his field of vision.

'If I die, you wil die,' he bellowed.

'If you die, the Earth will live,' the Doctor said, standing his ground. 'I've died many times before, Xznaal, and death doesn't scare me.'

It was getting hotter. There was fire behind the glass door that led into the rest of the ship. Hot gases would be swirling around the ship, melting plastics and the softer metals like cast iron. The light from the flames was pouring into the Dispersion Chamber, and soon the flames themselves would be in here.

Above him, the Red Death continued to rage.

Xznaal brought a claw up, sweeping the Doctor from his path and charging towards the release controls. The Martian tugged at the lever, but it didn't move. He tried again, and it came away in his claw.

The Doctor took a step back. 'You are beaten.'

Xznaal turned, still defiant. 'I can still make my mark on history, Doctor,' he roared. 'As the man who killed you.'

The Martian was holding a burning torch, a piece of wreckage from a damaged section of floor. The firelight danced over the landscape of the Martian's face, throwing its rifts and valleys into sharp contrast. A sweep from the torch and the Doctor stumbled, struggling to retain his balance. He was pinned against the wal now.

Xznaal tossed the torch aside, reached over him and yanked off one of the stainless steel gas cylinders bolted to the bulkhead. Xznaal swung it down without effort, angling it at the Doctor.

'You saw what the liquid nitrogen did to Vrgnur,' Xznaal rasped. 'Imagine the effect it would have on soft Gallifreyan flesh.'

The Doctor had no time to do anything but wince as Xznaal tugged at the valve. A jet of colourless gas spurted out, streaming over his

cheek. The Doctor opened his eye and turned back to Xznaal.

'Nothing's going right for you today, is it?'

Xznaal hurled the canister at him with an exasperated grunt. The Doctor had already dived out of the way. He bent down to examine the cylinder as it rolled over to him, shutting off the valve to prevent any more gas from escaping.

Xznaal loomed over him, hissing.

The Doctor held up the cylinder so that Xznaal could see it. 'Helium,' he cal ed up at the monolith. 'An inert gas.

Harmless, especially to a Time Lord with a respiratory bypass system. And now I have the satisfaction of knowing that when you utter your last words, they'll be squeaky ones.'

'Your last words wil be lost to the winds, Time Lord,' Xznaal cheeped. He pointed one claw at the floor, resting the other on a vast red lever.

The Doctor looked down and realised that his feet were planted on the edge of the iris hatch.

Xznaal grabbed the lever and pulled.

The hatch dilated open and the wind whipped up from the gaping hole behind the Doctor lifting the tails of his frock coat. The Doctor steadied his feet, balancing right on the lip of the opening. He glanced back over his shoulder.

Debris was pouring through the hole and out over London.

'That's a terrific view,' the Doctor observed, turning back.

Xznaal grabbed the Doctor's throat, yanking him off his feet and swinging him over the hole. The Doctor's legs pedalled in thin air, and he tried to keep control of his breathing.

The Doctor was still gripping the gas cylinder. He brought it down on the Ice Warrior's shoulder, and again. He only succeeded in denting the cylinder, which slipped from his grip.

There was an explosion far behind them, a great reverberation that ran the full length of the ship. The warship lurched. Another explosion. Another. These weren't missile strikes: the magnetic engines were in chain reaction now.

'Goodbye,' the Doctor said softly.

Xznaal said nothing, he simply released his grip.

The Doctor's hands tried to shoot forwards, to grab onto the edge of the hatchway, but the gas cylinder was in the way. With al his weight tugging at it, the canister began rolling inexorably towards the edge. Wide-eyed, the Doctor tried to scrabble over it, a movement which ended abruptly as he found himself outside.

The underside of the Martian ship stretched above him, dark, spiky metal as far as even his eyes could see. The only break was the circular hatch he had just fallen through, which was diminishing with every second. The wind was whipping around him, drowning out the sound of the ship tearing itself apart.

Xznaal was leaning over, his claws clenched in triumph. He was rumbling with laughter. The fire came only moments later, lapping around the Martian, surging over his vast frame and obliterating him. He died satisfied that he had killed a Time Lord, that his people had been avenged.

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119

Extract from the memoirs of Professor Bernice Summerfield

The Provisional Government forces had been rounded up. Eve Waugh and Alan were filing a report in front of the White Tower. The Brigadier and I were up in the Lanthorn Tower, peering through binoculars at the Martian warship. Even at an altitude of ten kilometres it filled my viewfinder.

It shook again.

'What's going on up there?' I asked. The vapour trails of the RAF planes were visible, but not the planes themselves, they were too small.

'The air strikes are really hitting home,' the Brigadier said enthusiastical y. 'That warship real y is a marvel, though.

It must be solid metal in places. How do you think the Doctor will escape?'

I considered my answer for a couple of seconds. 'The magnetic platform won't be reliable - it depends on power from the warship. By now, he's probably destroyed the gas and he'll be making his way to the shuttle bay.'

'And that's in that compartment towards the front, isn't it? So, we watch out for movement along - '

The warship exploded.

'My God,' the Brigadier said softly. 'Not again.'

All around us, people were cheering. The shouts and whoops almost drowned out the rumbling, rolling sound of the explosion as it reached ground level.

'He ... he might have survived,' I said.

'He might have,' the Brigadier said gently. 'Professor Summerfield ... Benny. The important thing is that he beat the Martians. Thanks to him the entire human race has been saved.'

The Brigadier was trying to convince himself as much as persuade me. He was the one who had ordered the air strike, and he'd been the Doctor's friend a great deal longer than I had.

'Yes,' I said, just wanting to cling to something that was certain. 'At least it was quick.'

The Brigadier shifted on his feet. I only found out a few years ago why - he must have known that when a pilot or astronaut dies in a fire or an explosion it's not a quick clean death. A fighter pilot can expect to live a full five to ten seconds as his aircraft explodes around him. It's as bad, apparently, for those who have to listen to the black box voice recorders afterwards.

I looked up, but the Martian ship had been atomised, the Harriers had returned to their base. The only thing up there was a cloud of black smoke, criss-crossed with white jet trails, and even that was begin to disperse.

Nothing had escaped. No Ice Warriors, no sonic cannons, no Red Death. Nothing.

End of extract

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The Doctor assessed the situation. There was good news and bad news. Taking the negative first: the ground was nearly ten thousand metres away, straight down. On the plus side, it was getting closer. Through the wispy clouds London was a dark grey expanse, broken up by great square patches of green and the grey squiggle of the Thames. It was so quiet. The air rushing past him was so thin that it hadn't the strength to carry sound -

Only one way out. He turned to Grace.

'Not afraid of heights are you?'

'Yeah!'

'So am I!'

In an instant he brought his body under control: slowing his hearts rate, regulating the adrenaline flow. The cold, the shock, the thin air, the friction might have been enough to kill a human, but were mere technicalities to a Time Lord. He increased the rate of his mental activity, and attempted to dedicate it al to one question. But his life was flashing in front of him, random memories and emotions. That hadn't happened in Adisham. Was that a bad sign?

It was a short life, especial y compared with some of his other -

'How do we get down?'

He turned to Benny, a sad smile on his face. 'Ask me again in a week's time.'

He would fall at roughly thirty metres a second, allowing for wind resistance and updraft. He would soon reach terminal velocity. He had about five and a half minutes to solve the problem using only the materials at hand.

His usual assortment of junk: a cricket ball, an elephant feather, a bag of kola nuts, a big ball of string, a piece of the True Cross, even a dog whistle.

Of course! The Flying Elephants of Saltaris III. Their wings were soaked in isocryte, the amazing anti-gravity material that -

He handed everything but the string to Benny.

The Doctor scowled.

That struck a chord in his memory.

'Curtain rings,' Bernice scowled.

'They might be important. Or they could come in useful.'

He flipped himself over onto his back, bending his knees slightly. The universe rotated until the Martian ship was directly above him. The fuselage was fragmenting, lit from within. The beams and vaults that gave the hul its strength were visible, like an X-ray. The skin of the hull was warping and melting under the intense heat. The fins atomised, streams of fuel streaking out across the afternoon sky. The Doctor hardly noticed.

They had stopped off at Mrs Darling's shop to buy some milk and bin bags.

120

Every Martian in the ship was dead, the Doctor realised. All their weapons and personal possessions had gone.

The Martian Invasion was over, the Earth and every human, every living thing on it had been saved. He might die, but five bil ion humans, twenty five bil ion trees, ten trillion insects and twelve hundred pandas were going to live. It was a simple transaction: one life for many.

There wasn't time for this. He had to concentrate on -

Helium.

And the Doctor realised that with five minutes and eight seconds to go, the chords in his memory had suddenly become a symphony.

The Doctor let go of the cylinder of helium, which continued to fall at the same velocity as him. He took the string for his pocket and tied one end to his left wrist. He retrieved the packet of curtain rings, biting it open with his teeth, careful not to spill any. He did a little mental arithmetic and threaded forty eight of them along the string, discarding the rest.

That took twenty two seconds. He'd fallen a little under a mile by now, less than a sixth of the total distance.

Now for the difficult part.

The Doctor tugged the roll of bin bags out of his pockets, unwound the first one, careful not to open it up. He drew the open side of the bag through the first curtain ring, creating a narrow aperture. The process had taken him a little under two seconds. He repeated it forty seven times, until all the bags were whipping up and down on the line like a row of bunting.

He'd been falling for two minutes. He was still well over five and a half kilometres above London. When he had started working, the clouds he had been falling through were the rounded cirrocumulus clouds - the ones that looked like fish skin from the ground. Now they were the larger altocumulus variety. The air was getting warmer and thicker as he hit the first hint of convection currents rising from the city.

The Doctor let go of the string and reached over for the helium canister. Calmly, he plucked it from the air and slotted the nozzle into the first big bag. A quick burst of the gas inflated it. Imperceptibly, the Doctor slowed down.

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Extract from the memoirs of Professor Bernice Summerfield

'Professor Summerfield,' a lad said gently. It wasn't one of the soldiers, it was the chap who ran the Internet Cafe.

'I won't be long. He ... he might have had a parachute or something.'

I kept my binoculars fixed upwards, but I could imagine his expression.

'The medics have arrived if you need one. The Brigadier's trying to rustle up some tea and coffee. My name's Doug, by the way. I'm sorry to hear about your friend.'

I looked away for the first time. Around me, Tower Green was full of ambulances and heavy army trucks. Outside, the crowd were being tended to by an army of paramedics and policemen. A great cluster of Provisional Government men were sitting in a circle, their weapons taken away from them. A couple of the UNIT men were taking their names and checking if they needed food or medicine. Al around, people were cheering and celebrating - I could hear a riverboat honking cheerfully, and the bells of all the cathedrals and churches were ringing. The whole country would be like this - street parties, crowded pubs and city squares. Everyone cheering, everyone

rejoicing.

And I felt dead inside, because the one man who deserved to be here wasn't.

I turned my binoculars back to the sky.

Two hundred metres up was a mass of black. Not a parachute or a hot air bal oon, but something between the two. It was drifting down. Underneath it al was a man wearing a flowing bottle-green velvet coat, baggy tan trousers and a grin. With his free hand he waved down at me.

The balloons had slowed the Doctor down, but he was still travelling too fast. I tried to shout a warning to him, but he was still too high to hear. The shouts alerted Lethbridge-Stewart and the others, though. Tower Green began to buzz with excitement. Everyone was pointing up, gasping, some were even laughing.

Alan had swung his camera up, and was tracking the Doctor down as he fell.

'Do you real y think those bin bags can support his weight?' Doug was asking. 'I reckon a few techos on the Net might argue with that. I like his style, though.'

I turned back to the sky. Barely clearing the walls now, the Doctor was clambering up, over the bal oons. It was tricky going, but he reached the top of the pile just as the apparatus reached the ground. Now they acted like a cushion or a safety mat.

The Doctor and his improvised parachute crashed into the ground mere feet from me, bouncing slightly. As he tumbled along, his limbs surfaced and disappeared back into the mass of black plastic. As he rol ed to a halt, he had reached the top of the bags.

I ran over, closely followed by Doug, the Brigadier, Lex Christian and Eve. The Doctor was lying on the pile of balloons, perfectly still. His eyes were closed, his head was bent back.

He wasn't moving.

'Doctor!' Doug shouted.

'Doctor,' Eve called over to the paramedics.

'Doctor,' the Brigadier called, clearly concerned.

I bent over him. 'Doctor?'

His pale blue eyes fluttered open and he pulled himself upright.

121

'Hello Bernice,' the Doctor beamed.

As he clambered off the crash-mat he had improvised, the bin bags began drifting away, up into the bright spring sky. He turned, watching them float over the walls of the Tower and off along the Thames - upstream, towards Tower Bridge. The Doctor plucked a cat hair from his lapel and grinned.

'I didn't think I'd see you again,' I told him. 'I thought you'd gone forever.'

'You of al people should have had a little more faith, Benny. I'm not ready to die yet,' the Doctor declared. 'In fact, I've never felt better.'

I opened my mouth but couldn't think of anything else to say. I hugged him, the Brigadier was slapping him on the back. All around us, the whole of London was cheering.

The Doctor was alive, the entire human race had been saved. Al was well with the world.

End of extract

122

Epilogue

Kisses to the Future

Wednesday, 8 May 2593

'The student reputation for outrageous behaviour and excessive consumption of alcohol is, of course, a myth.

Most students are extremely studious and hard-working,' Benny announced knowledgeably. 'If we want to uncover evidence of hedonism, one need look no further than the teaching staff. Professors in particular spend much of the time in a state of advanced inebriation.'

'Bernice, you sound like a professor already,' the Doctor assured her.

'Thank you.' Benny knocked back another vodka. 'Robarman, another round, please, if you would.'

'Certainly, Professor Summerfield.' Two more glasses joined their friends on their table. The college bar, quaintly named The Witch and Whirlwind, was decorated with rather wonderful gold fittings that warranted further in-depth investigation.

Benny sipped her ale. A rich taste that also warranted further in-depth investigation. She looked up at the Doctor.

'After this, I really think we should get my stuff out of the TARDIS and up to my room.'

***

The TARDIS had landed in a concrete expanse that Benny's induction pack had rather optimistically labelled a piazza. It had been raining since they had arrived, longer judging by the torrents of water gushing down the overflow channels. Benny's new home, the Garland College Hall of Residence, was a vast barrel shaped building in soaked brick. Its corridors and stairways were empty. A month before the start of term, the entire planet seemed deserted.

'Do you think it wil ever stop raining?' Benny asked.

The Doctor considered the question, peering off over her shoulder. 'The orbital lift has permanently altered the weather patterns by the

look of it,' he concluded, pointing over to the north. A silver line had been drawn, bisecting the sky. The lift was a design familiar from a thousand Outer Planets, a metal spire tall enough to poke out of the atmosphere, al owing incredibly energy-efficient launches into low orbit. Cheap spaceflight, with a heavy cost to the local environment.

'Bother,' Benny said, moderating her language in the Doctor's presence. Then she realised he'd disappeared into the TARDIS, so she repeated the sentiment using the F-word, just because she could.

The Time Lord emerged. 'You'l be needing this more than I will,' he said, handing her an umbrella. The umbrella.

She opened it up. It was a hundred yards and three flights of steps between her new room and her old one, and it took an hour of moving heavy boxes and cases between the two before the job was finished. Benny took a last look at the TARDIS and then walked up to her new room. It was what an estate agent would describe as

'compact', but there was a perfectly serviceable kitchenette sort of thing, a nice bathroom, a study big enough for half a dozen students (if they breathed in) and all her books. Final y, there was the bedroom.

She flopped down onto the bed next to the Doctor, who was looking a bit sad. Wolsey brushed against her legs.

'You need a companion,' the Doctor announced.

'Won't you miss him?'

'I'll miss him.' He hesitated, brushing back a lock of hair. 'Look, Bernice, I don't like goodbyes, but sometimes... '

He produced a very large bottle of champagne and grinned. 'Napoleon gave this to me, for services rendered. The very first magnum of Brut Impérial. I've been saving it for a special occasion.'

He popped the cork.

'Er, this is a tremendous oversight on my part, but I don't have any wine glasses.'

'Mugs wil do.'

Benny unpacked a couple and the Doctor poured. When he had

finished, they held them up. Wolsey watched the proceedings with interest.

'To the adventures of Professor Bernice Summerfield,' the Doctor declared.

'To a,' Benny paused for a moment, and then smiled, 'Doctor who might change, but won't ever die.'

'To the future, wherever and whatever it might be,' the Doctor said.

'The future,' Benny echoed.

They clinked their mugs together.

'I had better go,' the Doctor said quietly, when he had finished his champagne.

Benny hesitated, looking into those deep blue eyes of his. 'Yes. Look, before you leave, there's one thing I have to do. I'd never forgive myself otherwise.'

The Doctor looked puzzled. 'What would that - '

She grabbed the lapels of his frock coat, kissed him square on the mouth and pushed him down hard onto the bed.

Wolsey jumped out of the way.

123

Sunday, November 23rd 1997

It was a beautiful morning.

The bright winter sun poured through the stained glass of Westminster Abbey, bathing the Lords, Ladies, Gentlemen and television cameras assembled to witness a unique occasion: the only Recoronation in the history of the United Kingdom. Six months on, the Martian Invasion was a distant memory. One author, a man named Oswald, even claimed that there had never been any Martians, it had al been part of the coup leaders' conspiracy to divert attention while they seized power. His main observation was that few people had actual y seen a Martian, and no items of alien technology had been recovered. Any 'sightings' of the Martians or their ship could be put down to mass hysteria or ball lightning. Oswald's book had become a best-seller, and his theory was particularly popular in the United States of America.

Queen Elizabeth sat on the coronation throne, the Imperial State Crown on her head, restored to its former glory.

The Recoronation would clear the constitutional way for the election of a new Parliament. Every single surviving member of the Provisional Government was in prison, caught trying to flee the country they had betrayed. David Staines had been one of the first, found trying to catch a Eurostar while disguised as a woman. The resultant police mugshot was destined to become one of the most enduring images of the Invasion.

Representatives of every nation on Earth were calling 'God save the Queen'. The European Union, the United States and the Japanese had made generous reconstruction grants, although Britain would continue to remember their inaction during the Dying Days for some considerable years. There was a great deal that needed doing, especial y in the northern cities. Things were changing, there was a new sense of optimism, of hope for the future.

Perhaps it would get worse before it would get better, but everyone knew that it would get better.

Behind the various ambassadors and heads of state stood the senior military men and other heroes of the Invasion. Outside, the crowds were cheering again, the sound percolating through the thick walls of the Abbey.

'It's a shame the Doctor couldn't be here.'

'Oh but he is, Doris.'

'Where?'

'See that chap with the scarf and the tin dog?' Lethbridge-Stewart pointed across the aisle.

'Oh yes. Is the blonde girl with him?'

'Judging by her dress-sense, I would say so.'

A couple of people leant over, stern looks on their faces. Alistair smiled back at them. When they recognised him, they mumbled their apologies and returned their attention to the ceremony. Montserrat Caballe had taken her place in front of the choir and now began to sing the Recoronation Aria, the specially-commissioned piece by Lord Lloyd-Webber. Future historians would count this as the first moment

of the New New Elizabethan Age, when British art and literature entered a brief, but prolific resurgence.

Alistair glanced over at Brigadier Bambera. His successors were going to do sterling work, probably even better than him. But he liked to think that he'd set a high standard for them. Hopefully in years to come, people would say that he had lived up to his illustrious ancestry, and that by and large he'd done a good job. He knew that he'd had a good innings, and despite the old saying, he'd neither died nor faded away. Retirement wasn't so bad, not on those terms.

And that's why, in the middle of a packed Westminster Abbey on one of the most important dates in British history, despite everything that had happened, General Alistair Gordon Lethbridge-Stewart found himself roaring with laughter.

THE END

124

Author Notes - Lance Parkin's guide to The Dying Days

Chapter 1

What We Saw From the Ruined House

Benny. The Dying Days wasn't just the first eighth Doctor book, it marked the point where Benny spun off into her own series (technically, she stayed where she was, in the New Adventures, and the Doctor spun off, but you know what I mean). Bernice Summerfield had been introduced in Love and War, by Paul Cornell, and her adventures continue to this day in Big Finish audios. She was hugely popular, both with the writers and the readers. Up until this point, she'd been the sarky human counterpoint to a rather dark and distant seventh Doctor. She was the voice of his conscience, as wel as being the sort of person he was making the galaxy safe for.

While she quickly developed a life of her own, Paul originally based her, in part, on Emma Thompson's character in the film The Tall Guy, and that's still the best place to look if you want to see Benny Summerfield walking and talking right there on your tel y. I mention this now only because there's an in-joke in chapter three which no-one will get otherwise.

The Doctor's house was introduced by Andrew Cartmel in his novel Warhead and his DWM comic strip Fellow Travellers. Over the course of the books, the Doctor popped back to it from time to time. This is the first time we saw it in the 'present day'.

I never got round to explaining how Benny got the letter, by the way. The book original y ended with her dropping it off for herself. But I came up with a much better ending than that...

The book contains a number of New Adventures cliches, most of them put there deliberately, some by force of habit. The first of these is the gratuitous nudity. At the time, we'd heard that the BBC Books were going to cut down on the 'adult' stuff (laughable as that seems, now that recent EDAs have featured tantric sex and a man in a romantic relationship with a poodle). So Benny gets her kit off here, for no reason whatsoever. Anime fans call this

'fifteening'.

The Doctor. It was very weird writing for a character who was exactly the same but completely different. Al the time, I was very conscious that everyone reading would be directly comparing my version with

the one in the TV

Movie. I cheated, really – we see the Doctor's early scenes from Benny's point of view, and she spends her time going 'gosh, he's exactly the same but completely different'. But that's exactly what the audience do with a new Doctor. The Doctor refers back to Love and War, his first meeting with Benny. Again, it's a dual purpose –

reminding people that this was a book with a heritage, but making something new out of that.

As Benny notes in chapter one, I couldn't pin down the name of the President of the United States or the Prime Minister, because there was going to be an election in both countries between me finishing the book and its publication. The Tories should have bribed me to say the PM was Tony Blair, simply because sod's law would almost certainly have guaranteed a landslide for John Major. But they didn't, and the rest is history. One of the amusing things, though, was that Staines could comfortably be either a Conservative or a New Labour Home Secretary.

Chapter 2

Foreign Soil

Lex Christian is the first character who's an homage to an existing one. This time, it's Dan Dare, who hopefully British readers will have heard of. For the others, Dan was the hero of The Eagle, the 50s (and 80s!) comic, a square-jawed, stiff upper-lipped space pilot, and absolutely one of the forerunners of Doctor Who – the influence it had, particularly on Terry Nation's stuff, was immense. The reason he's in The Dying Days is a vaguely obscure one – the first Dan Dare story in The Eagle is set in 1996 and 1997, so it 'took place' at the same time as the book.

Reality had caught up with fiction. The irony now, of course, in this age of digital cameras, mobile phones and cloned sheep is that we're beyond Dan Dare technology – except they have better space travel. The name was Dan Dare's original name when the strip was being developed.

Everyone reading knew the 'real' reason this was the last Virgin book, and all the way through, I play with that. One of the themes of the book is the interplay between 'real life' stuff and fiction. I hesitate to say this, but the book has two levels – the narrative, about the Doctor and Benny fighting monsters and also a knowing commentary on the situation. One of the more blatant examples is the Who Killed Kennedy sequence, where a fictional reason is given for Virgin losing their licence.

Veronica Halliwell first appeared (and died) in the Missing Adventure System Shock.

Staines is an idiot. Anyone who'd actually read Who Kil ed Kennedy couldn't possibly think it was called I Killed Kennedy. The title is a statement, not a question.

Benny, an expert on Mars, finally gets to use her knowledge. She'd visited Mars in Transit, but been possessed at the time. Legacy had Ice Warriors, but was set on Peladon, and she left the Doctor the book before he visited Mars again in GodEngine.

Patrick Moore, a real astronomer, and Bernard Quatermass, from the 50s serials (or, more correctly, the John Mills version from the last

serial – the one set around 1997) argue about Martians. In our universe, Patrick Moore would be right. But this is the Who universe, and Bernard's fears are proved correct.

Chapter 3

Return to Mars

The Brigadier. I wasn't sure about using the Brigadier at first, it felt a bit like tokenism ('he's worked alongside every Doctor!'), but Bex pointed out that, perhaps more than any other character, the Brigadier had developed over the course of the New Adventures. We found out about Kadiatu, his descendant, but more importantly, we saw him in action in books like Blood Heat, No Future and Happy Endings, and he had come on to be... well, the Doctor's oldest friend. And as I wrote the book, the Brig became more and more central to it. Without giving anything away, he gets the last word of the book, which is usually a sign of someone's importance to the story.

The astronaut's survival kit is straight out of a nineteen seventies Doctor Who annual – every year, breaking up the stories about people who sometimes vaguely looked like the Doctor and Sarah, there would be a feature about real astronauts.

The Party. Oh boy. Allan Bednar, the illustrator of the BBCi version of this book, has hidden in a cupboard and won't come out until I assure him he doesn't have to draw the party. This, of course, is a theme party, and the theme is 'lame in-jokes'. Where to start? Well... the guest list includes Emma Peel from The Avengers and Lady Penelope from Thunderbirds. Lalla Ward makes the first of two appearances in the book. The rest... well, I'll let you work them out. Once you spot the Old Woman from the Saturday Night Armistice, then you'll be heading for a high score. Apparently, if you write a Star Wars novel (which I'd love to do, by the way, if any Star Wars novel people are reading this), then you have to supply footnotes explaining al the references to existing Star Wars characters, for copyright reasons – so you have to say 'he first appeared in the comics', or 'he's from such and such a novel'. If I'd done that for TDD, or was doing it for this annotated version, then the footnotes would be longer than the book.

Greyhaven is my Ian Richardson character. There's always someone in my books 'played' by Ian Richardson. I'm sure there was a very good reason for that at one point, but if there is, I've forgotten it. Anyway, this is the only 'Ian Richardson' specifically based on a character Richardson played – you might very well think that he's based on Francis Urquhart from House of Cards, but I couldn't possibly comment. The character was original y named Lord Winchester, but the Virgin legal people thought that the Marquis of Winchester would

sue, so it got changed.

"Afro-Saxon" was a bizarre proofreading change, one that makes no sense at al . So I let it stay in, on the grounds it would give me an amusing anecdote if the book ever appeared online in annotated form.

Another New Adventure cliché was a token gay character, usual y a young man who smiles winsomely, then dies a horrible, gory death two chapters later. Not that I want to give away what happens. I also out Ralph Cornish from The Ambassadors of Death, for no other reason than that's the sort of thing we used to do in the Virgin books.

The reference to IIF building a nuclear waste dump on the Moon is me, very cheekily, linking perhaps the best television series of all time, Edge of Darkness, with perhaps the worst television series of al time, Space:1999.

The reference to Donnebys must rank as one of the more obscure in the book, but it harks back to the very first Who novel – it's the rocket company that Ian has applied to work for.

Chapter 4

Gratuitous Violets

One of my better chapter titles.

I like the stuff on Mars, with the human astronauts. It's something I perhaps should have developed more. On the other hand, it isn't their story. They're there as a pretext.

Chesterton Road is real, it's by Ladbroke Grove tube station, and you went past it to get to the Virgin offices.

Again, it's an in-joke. Because, even if I'm the only one who admits it, every single Who author thought about Ian Chesterton when they saw the sign.

Note that Benny real y fancies this new Doctor, but won't admit it.

The John Smith and the Common Men album. They're the pop combo that Susan's listening to in the first ever episode on TV. I loved the idea that they were still going. The Who universe probably has tribute bands to them, and Britpop there was very subtly different because of their influence. Again, I'm bringing Doctor Who full circle –

or at least referring back to its beginnings.

Storms Over Avallion (or some minor variation of it) was the provisional title of Battlefield, a TV story that is set a few months before The Dying Days. The joke (first introduced in Kate Orman's books, shamelessly ripped off by me here and in Father Time) is that in the Doctor Who universe, there are just as many Doctor Who fanzines, novels and internet discussion groups, but they're al discussing real alien invasions that the government wants covering up.

Chapter 5

The World at One

Deflowering

Lex Christian upholds another New Adventures tradition – retconning a sex life for a television companion. I think, in the course of sixty books, that we managed to deflower every regular character from the TV series. Apart from K9 – and I once proposed a book where K9 got a robot dog girlfriend. Ironic for a company cal ed Virgin, I know, but their 'erotic fiction' line was edited in the same room, and something clearly rubbed off. So to speak. Bizarrely, there were plenty of Who references in the mucky books, too... or so I'm told.

Rubbish monsters

The Drahvins and Bandrils were among the more rubbish of the Doctor Who monsters. The joke here, not that the Brigadier realises, is that some alien invasions were beneath the Doctor's dignity to deal with.

Old clothes

Benny changes into the outfit she was wearing on the cover of her first novel, Love and War.

Monkey business

The description of Twelve Monkeys could equal y wel apply to the TV Movie.

Boldly going

Ha! I was right. I was right about Star Trek X. Five years before it was written, I guessed right! The line 'they knew it was the last one, so they could get away with all sorts of stuff' could be the tagline for The Dying Days.

Chapter 6

Close Encounters

The Roof

It's unclear what the men are doing putting that thing on the roof , because I never explain it. They are setting up a homing beacon for the Martian ship, the same sort of beacon that the Martians need in The Seeds of Death. It's why the ship ends up over Trafalgar Square. But I never explain that properly. Sorry.

Bessie

Note that Bessie's registration number has changed.

Life on Mars

Until Mariner, most scientists thought Mars had primitive life, and none doubted that it could support life, at least in the sense that the top of Everest or Antarctica could 'support life'. Even as late as Viking, some people still held out hope. By then, it had been clearly established that Mars in the Who universe had a breathable atmosphere. So here, they're only discovering what anyone who'd seen Pyramids of Mars already knew.

The UN

One prediction I got wrong – I thought Mary Robinson would be the new Secretary General of the UN, but Kofi Annan got the job.

The X Files

I love the end of this chapter – there's a real sense of pace. It breaks the rules, too, of course. This was the era of the X-Files. Bex was a huge fan, and joked that she real y wanted to see an episode which ended with Mulder and Scully saying al that usual guff about how there probably were aliens, but they'd never have any concrete evidence... just as one of the flying saucers from Independence Day flew overhead and the caption 'to be continued' comes up.

That scene doesn't quite make it into The Dying Days, but the sentiment behind it – that Doctor Who could do the

'foreplay' that the X-files does (conspiracies, government cover-ups,

aliens) but, unlike the X-Files it could then go onto the 'orgasm' of full scale alien invasion – informs the whole book. But TDD stil breaks the rules – alien invasions aren't allowed to be public. I only got away with it because it was the last book.

Independence Day

Hmmmm... Independence Day. The film hadn't come out in May 1996 when I was commissioned, although I'd seen the trailer. The book was finished by the time I heard Independence Day UK, the radio story that's even more like The Dying Days. There was something in the air, that year – Mars Attacks! also came out.

Back to television

I know how I'd like to bring Doctor Who back to television. I've had the scene perfectly mapped out in my mind for years. No adverts, no pre-publicity, just an plain, ordinary night of television – there's a new medical drama on BBC1 at eight that looks OK. Eight o'clock, the announcer solemnly tells the audience that they're going to the newsroom for a newsflash.

Then a real BBC newsreader tells us that there's an alien spacecraft over London. We cut to a confused OB

reporter – what's going on. Then a electronic voice from the ship – 'Surrender humans, or we wil exterminate you'.

Then the reporter panics, and starts to run away, and bumps into a very famous actor in a frock coat, with a gorgeous young woman just behind him.

'Don't worry,' the stranger says, 'You're safe. I'l see to that'. The reporter goes 'Who are you?'. And the Doctor turns to camera and smiles and goes. 'Me? I'm back!" Cue opening credits, cue that theme tune, cue the phone network melting down as everyone in the country is either phoning each other to tell them to watch BBC1 or shouting that they know, they're trying to damn well watch it.

I just love the idea of some ordinary piece of television suddenly becoming Doctor Who, because... well, it's either that or just plain, ordinary television.

C

hapter 7

Work, Rest and Play

Title

Another good chapter title, if a little lateral.

Homages

Original y, the scene with the President and his aide featured a flat-voiced FBI agent and his winsome ginger partner. Even though they weren't named, this was dropped because the legal people got nervous. Bizarrely, I thought, given the number of 'homages' in the book. I have to note that this was the only book I ever got legal advice from Virgin on, and I got a lot. Perhaps, as it was the last Who book, the lawyers hadn't got any other books to read that month.

Queen and country

I did wonder about the Queen evacuating the country. I suspect, in the unlikely event of alien invasion, that she'd want to stand her ground, in the same way the royal family stayed in the country during WW2. That would clash with what happens later in the book, though. This year, I've read a book called The Secret State, by Peter Hennessy, which says that in the event of nuclear war, the plan in the sixties was to get the Queen onto the royal yacht and off to Canada ('if it still exists' – not the yacht, Canada).

Keeping it real

I was also really nervous about involving 'real people' in the invasion section. You'l note that, after six chapters chock full of real people, from now on it's just fictional characters. As wel as legal nervousness (not wanting to paint real people as collaborators or as accepting Martian rule) there would have been something irredeemably camp about having Gazza or Scary Spice joining the fight. Watching LA destroyed in Independence Day, though, I did find myself wondering how many movie stars survived.

The Ice Warriors

With the Ice Warrior, I wanted to get across that it wasn't just some tal extra in a costume with a head that didn't fit properly. This was a monster, and it looked like a monster. The idea was that it was an Ice Warrior done on a Hollywood budget. Another little touch – the

reason the TV Movie people gave for not using monsters was that they were too expensive – Phil ip Segal said something like ‘the budget would run to about two monster costumes, and you can’t tell a story about the invasion of Earth with two monsters’. As a bifurcated handed salute to that sentiment, and sentiments like it, in The Dying Days there are never more than two Martians in the same scene.

You could make this story for television on about the same budget as a couple of episodes of Born and Bred.

Chapter 8

Death and Diplomacy

The plot thickens

Finally, someone explains the plot! All this exposition, of course, is just a way of getting all that ‘plot’ stuff out of the way so we can get down to having monsters chasing our heroes and going "grrrr" a lot.

The plan

Greyhaven’s plan, while basically undemocratic, isn’t actual y an evil one. He wants to reopen all the closed factories, shipyards and mines. I’m sure someone, somewhere could write an essay on how The Dying Days – the first Who story set in the Blair era, as Tim Col ins could tell you - was a metaphor for how New Labour courted big business and encouraged globalisation to get unemployment down.

Unanswered questions

Fans have often asked how The Dying Days ‘fits’, given that everyone on Earth should know about the Martians afterwards. Here, Benny asks the same question. The Doctor doesn’t answer.

I am he and he is me

Note that the eighth Doctor speaks of the seventh Doctor in the third person.

The Brigadier

The Brigadier knows that only the Doctor can get them out of this situation – he doesn’t know what’s about to happen to his old friend.

Chapter 9

Our Friends From Mars

So clichéd

New Adventures cliché piles on New Adventures cliché as a prostitute eats in a greasy café, smokes, quotes from Round the Horne, then makes a reference to a recent film. In my defence, she at no point drops a lyric from a pop song into the conversation, inverts the ‘end my life’ scene from The Happiness Patrol by shooting the Doctor, turns out to be related to a character from the UNIT era, notes that there was a lot less air pollution before the invention of the motor car or quotes from The Second Coming.

Such a bind

I like the fact the baddy keeps his evil plan in a Wallace and Gromit ringbinder.

Chapter 10

An Englishman's Home

Alone at last

We see the Martians alone for the first time, and – surprise, surprise – they've got an evil plan that Greyhaven doesn't know about.

Code of honour

The original idea of the book was that it would be the human characters who ascribed nobility and culture to the Ice Warriors, but the Martians would real y be just nasty, snarling, spitting slabs of hate. Monsters, in other words.

So the humans would keep going on about how they came from a noble culture, and had a code of honour, but everything the Martians actually did was just sadistic and nasty. After the book was finished, I saw Mars Attacks!

where the Pierce Brosnan scientist character does that joke. But by then, the Martians, particularly Xznaal, had developed into pretty rounded characters. This chapter contrasts Xznaal and the Brigadier – both warriors, both having seen better days, both full of regrets, both thirsting for one last battle.

Grant Morrison

While, over the years, the odd 'influence' from Grant Morrison's work has been felt in my books, the coronation of an alien as king of England predates the same scene in The Invisibles by a couple of years. It is, as Greyhaven is at pains to note, a fairly accurate depiction of a real coronation ceremony.

Queen continuity

Christmas on a Rational Planet, Lawrence Miles's 1996 debut novel, had a throwaway reference to the

'recoronation' of Queen Elizabeth II. I thought I was being very clever by tying up a loose end by showing why she needed a second coronation. But Lawrence was tying up a loose end himself – how there could be a 'King' in Battlefield (set in the mid to late nineties, and a couple of months before TDD) but the Queen could celebrate

her Golden Jubilee in Head Games (a sequence of which was set in 2001). As is often the way, two people trying to solve a continuity error have left a much bigger one in its place.

Top Secret

The Brigadier and Eve joke about UNIT being a top secret organisation. In the TV series, while UNIT's meant to be one of the most covert organisations on the planet, they also drive around in big lorries marked 'UNIT', and the (local!) reporters in Spearhead from Space know who the Brigadier is, which organisation he runs and that he investigates 'little green men'. It's clearly one of the worst-kept secrets in the world.

Chapter 11

That Which Does Not Kil Us...

Titles

The chapter title was the provisional title of the novel The Also People. The provisional title of this chapter was

'The Yeti on the Loo', and you all know why, so I don't need to explain.

The Tripods

We never see the Martian hang-gliders in action, which is a bit of a shame. Note that the Martians also have

'tripods' (as the Martians in The War of the Worlds did), and machines that look like the Martian war machines in the fifties film version of War of the Worlds.

129

Morrotov cocktail

Benny comes into her own here. This was inspired by something Mark Clapham told me – Morrisons supermarket's own brand vodka was, and maybe still is, called Morrotov. Well, Mark was a university student at the time, he'd know. Benny said in Love and War that there's not a problem in the world that can't be solved with vodka. Here she demonstrates this by making a Morrotov cocktail.

The dying Doc

And the Doctor dies. SFX had already reported that the Doctor died halfway through the book, so everyone knew it was coming. It was the last book, I could do it. Every other book, you know for a fact that he's going to come bouncing back. Not here. Some people objected that BBC were doing Eighth Doctor books, so he couldn't die.

Look again – the Doctor says he's twelve hundred years old. This book clearly happens after the BBC Eighth Doctor books (and still, even after the Earth arc, in the future of the current EDAs – although the Doctor remembers The Dying Days in The Scarlet Empress). You can have your EDAs, but it'll end like this.

I realised afterwards that this is exactly what happens in the last episode of Star Cops, where Nathan dies. The title of that episode? Little Green Men – there's this discovery on Mars, you see, and it's uncovered this conspiracy to keep the existence of Martians secret...

Chapter 12

The No Doctors

Seven up

...and it was all a horrible dream, and the Doctor was alive after all. The seventh Doctor had dominated the New Adventures, and it would have been odd for him not to show up in the last book.

Dear diary

The narrative switches so that Benny is the main character, and we switch to diary entries – technically, extracts from her memoirs. We knew Benny was going to survive this book, because Virgin had announced she was spinning off. Her memoirs are, it seems, written when she's an old woman. Phyl ida Law, perhaps, instead of Emma Thompson.

Half-human shield

One theory I've always had, one you see in al my Who books, is that the Doctor emits a sort of shield that protects his companions when he's around. Not a real shield, but the narrative rules twist around him to his advantage. In Just War, for example, when a squad of Nazis fire machine guns at him and Chris, they all miss.

But Benny, separated from the Doctor, is easily captured and tortured. The Doctor can just get away with things that ordinary people can't. But with the Doctor dead, we're back in the realm of ordinary things – people have to eat and wash. They need to look out for themselves.

Staines

Staines is a loyal servant of the crown, even if a Martian is wearing it.

Benny's lecture

Bernice's lecture refers to what we know about the Martians from the books and TV episodes featuring the Ice Warriors. By the time of Transit, the human race is as technical y advanced as the Martians, and wins a ruthless, genocidal war against them on Mars.

In a change to our scheduled programme...

The BBC often cancel programmes that have a vague passing resemblance to contemporary tragic news stories.

The Fugitive, for example, always gets postponed when there's a train crash, because there's a train crash in it.

So they've cancelled the X Files the week of the Martian invasion.

Lex

Lex resurfaces after vanishing from UNIT HQ shortly after the Martian invasion. See? I hadn't forgotten him.

Chapter 13

Earth Attacks!

Going for a Burton

The chapter title, obviously, is a reference to Mars Attacks!

Tape

The fact the tape is NTSC is a clue to its origin.

Uruk

'From the streets of ancient Uruk to the common room of a twenty-sixth century university' is another meta reference – the very first New Adventure, Timewyrm:Genesys was set in ancient Uruk, the last one ends... well, we're not there yet, so I'd better not say.

130

A ripe old age

The history book with the scary eye is, of course, A History of the Universe, another one of my books, which was written before The Dying Days, so doesn't refer to it. I seem to set the date of my death here – but we don't know what year Benny is writing from. As the current Big Finish audios are set in 2601, and Benny's not written her memoirs yet, it looks like I'm going to make it to at least ninety-nine years old.

Secret silos

I quite like the idea that the book starts with humans talking about terraforming Mars, and ends with the Martians attempting to Aresform (A NASA term referring to the god Ares) Earth. This section, in retrospect, draws from Quatermass II, with its secret silos full of alien nasty stuff.

Retroactive continuity

The 'perhaps I'll just be retconned' line proved to be a firm favourite in internet discussion of the book. It's another meta reference – 'retconning' is short for 'retroactive continuity', briefly 'going back and changing things so they all fit together better or make more

sense'. It's a term originally used in comics fandom, and Doctor Who fans retcon, for example, how the Brigadier retires from UNIT in 1976 according to one story, but was only made head of UNIT

in 1979 according to another. Benny muses (not for the first time in the book) how The Dying Days fits into Doctor Who continuity.

Social chaos

One of the running themes of the book is how thin the line between a functioning society and social chaos is. I'm not sure I entirely agree with that, but there are a number of reminders throughout the book that what we think of as a stable, secure society relies a lot on goodwill and the trust in the people that lead us.

Since the book was written we've had the death of Princess Diana and the fuel protests, both of which, very briefly, really seemed to destabilise British society. In this scene, the bul etproof glass has become a symbol of Greyhaven's weakness, not his strength.

Benny

Note the contrast between the Doctor and Benny when dealing with the Ice Warriors – earlier, the Doctor just strolled into the mothership and Xznaal didn't kill him. Here, Benny's sneaking around a shuttlecraft, and despite her cunning plan, she's caught.

When the plans for the Benny books were drawn up, Virgin gathered about half a dozen writers together to come up with ideas – one thing we were all adamant shouldn't happen (but weren't quite sure how to do it) was that Benny couldn't be 'a Doctor substitute'. The dynamic of the books had to be different – here we start to see a hint of the difference. Benny can't just say 'take me to your leader', she has to worry about basic things like money and speaking the native language.

Chapter 14

Look! Up In The Sky!

Implausibility

Ogilvy notes how scientifically implausible the Ice Warriors are.

The crown

The crown falls off Xznaal's head – symbolic, but also a way of making sure the crown isn't on the mothership in the last chapter.

Constable

The Hay Wain has appeared a few times throughout the book – the first time as a design on a tray owned by the Doctor. Here Xznaal uses the real thing as a tray.

Benny banter

Benny is giving as good as she gets here, but note that all her banter isn't actually changing anything. She's not talking Xznaal out of his plan, as the Doctor might, just making him more resolute.

War of the Worlds

'It's bows and arrows against the lightning' is a quote from War of the Worlds – a soldier commenting on the futility of fighting the Martians. The line about only two Martians and one human being left is a paraphrase of an American general in the sixties discussing the Cold War and Communists. The image of the Ice Warrior Benny has was a description of the cover of the original Virgin edition of the book.

The Holo-man

The reason for the giant hologram is a convoluted one. Original y, I asked for the cover to be a mirror image of the first New Adventure, Genesys. That had four elements – a monster in the foreground, a full-length image of a man, with a temple wall in the background... and a ghostly floating face of the Doctor. The book covers had moved towards a literal depiction of a scene from the book since then.

So I had to have a specific scene with a monster confronting a full

length Benny in front of a castle wall, with a giant floating ghostly Doctor head in at some point! In the end, the idea of mirroring the original cover was dropped, because it didn't fit the new cover format. But the version that was used still has echoes of the Genesys cover.

Famous last words

Benny's 'last words' are actually taken from an unpublished fan story I wrote with Mark Clapham, where they were given to the Doctor's companion there, Iffy.

Divided loyalties

The last scene of this chapter has divided people. Grown men have admitted to crying, others think it's bombastic and utterly out of character. Remember that at the time, most people reading the book knew the Doctor died in it.

The guy's just come back from the dead, so I think he's al owed a big entrance. If it had been a TV story, it's the bit that would get the biggest cheer at conventions.

I am the Doctor

The Doctor's descriptions of himself come from various books including, for the first time, the forthcoming BBC

ones. 'The man that gives monsters nightmares' was coined by Paul Cornell; the 'Bringer of Darkness' is from the Remembrance of the Daleks novelisation by Ben Aaronovitch, more than any other book the harbinger of the New Adventures era; 'Eighth Man Bound' is from Christmas on a Rational Planet; the Doctor had been 'Time's Champion' throughout the NAs, and became 'Life's Champion' in Vampire Science; 'the guy with two hearts' is from the TV Movie and 'I make history better' is from the short story 'Continuity Errors' by Steven Moffat. 'I... am...

the Doctor!' was from the TV Movie – more specifically, the adverts for the TV Movie.

Handover

I had real y wanted to have a symbolic handover from the Virgin books to the BBC books – the Doctor literally having something in his hand at the end of this book that he still had in his hand at the beginning of the first EDA.

But my book was finished before The Eight Doctors was commissioned, so that proved impossible. The short lead times for to the BBC books meant that a number of things I wish I could have done couldn't happen.

The original plan for the EDAs was that Grace would be the companion – that changed very late in the day, so late that Kate and Jon wrote sections of Vampire Science with Grace. The Dying Days would have had Grace in if I'd have known the BBC books couldn't. I'd have mentioned Sam, the new BBC companion, if I'd had the chance.

Agendas

My favourite line in the book is probably 'And it was'. Virgin were constantly being accused from some quarters of

'betraying Doctor Who', 'pursuing their own agenda', 'change for change's sake' and having 'an ego that wants to see Doctor Who destroyed'. As, of course, have the EDAs, Dan Freedman, Big Finish, Phillip Segal, 'Curse of Fatal Death', JNT, Robert Holmes, Patrick Troughton and, if you go back far enough, Nigel Kneale, HG Wells, and the first caveman to daub paint on a wall. Anyone making Doctor Who that doesn't get that reaction is almost certainly doing something monumentally wrong. The Doctor's not back, he never went away and he never will.

Chapter 15

Going Down in History

Turning the tables

He's back and it's about time... in the space of three words, the Doctor's alive, and the tables have completely turned.

Survival

I wasn't going to explain how the Doctor survived at first – who cares, now he's back? But everyone that read the first draft wanted an explanation, so I put one in. Re-reading the book, you'll see that the Doctor's been very busy, working with Lex Christian and Eve (which is why we've not seen them, either).

Scary monsters

When the Doctor confronts Xznaal, the description of him is an inversion of the first description of Xznaal back in chapter seven. He won't admit it, but Xznaal's scared.

Into the abyss

The 'gazing into the abyss' quote is, of course, an inversion of the Nietzsche quote. Along with quoting from Things Fall Apart, it was the favourite quote of the New Adventures, popping up all over the place to encapsulate how the

'dark' seventh Doctor was becoming as much of a monster as his adversaries. The eighth Doctor is different – and he's conquered the Red Death once, so it's not going to frighten him now.

Dying again

I wanted people to think that I'd brought the Doctor back to kill him, and that he would die falling out of the ship. It's meant to evoke a Reichenbach Fal s / Logopolis moment... but I don't think it works – he's such an irresistible force in this last chapter, that you don't wonder if he'l survive, you only wonder how he'll manage to.

In the end, I wanted to end the book with a memorable image – and,

in those terms, it works. By quoting from Logopolis, I perhaps fooled people for ten seconds into thinking he was going to regenerate.

E

pilogue

Kisses to the Future

Kisses to the past

The chapter title is a play on Phillip Segal's comment that the TV Movie has 'kisses to the past', like the Doctor finding a long woollen scarf.

Self-criticism

I'm biased, I know, but I love this last chapter, I think absolutely every word falls in the right place and has exactly the right weight. I'm very self-critical – there's one whole Who book of mine that I wouldn't have published, if I'd had the choice. But I think this chapter's the best thing I've ever written.

Pastiche

The first section of the book is meant to be a pastiche of Paul Cornell's writing style, as a lead in to the next New Adventure, written by him, Oh No It Isn't. It's meant to quickly sketch in the set up of the Benny books for people, so, hopeful y, they'd buy next month's book, not just leave with the Doctor. In the end, though, if I could write like Paul Cornel , I'd write like Paul Cornell, and saying 'wonderful' a lot isn't the same thing.

Robarman

I'd first used the 'robarman' joke in Cold Fusion.

Bicyles

Benny's bicycle was, at one point, meant to be something she used in al her books – possibly a nod to Emma Thompson's character in the Arnie film Junior, a professor who got around campus on a bike. In the event, I think it was only mentioned in Oh No It Isn't.

Swearing

'She used the F-word because she could'. The BBC wouldn't let the

New Adventures use swear words, as there had been complaints after a few early books had done so (most memorably Iceberg, which began with the memorable phrase ‘ "F- you, mate! Just f- you you f-ing w-ker". There was no doubting the strength of feeling in the biker. He was angry.’, the sheer gratuitous nature and psychological insight of which caused much merriment among the NA writers). I had, of course, wanted Benny to use the F-word, not merely al ude to it, but even three pages from the end, no swearing was allowed.

No hanky panky in the TARDIS

In the TV Movie, the Doctor had kissed Grace, and some of the fanboys weren’t happy about that at all. The Doctor doesn’t kiss girls. Note that he doesn’t in this scene, either. Exactly what Benny and the Doctor do or don’t get up to must remain a mystery (and BBCi have decided against letting Allan Bednar draw a picture of it!).

Alternative endings

There was original y a middle section to this chapter, that went through four versions, three of which are available elsewhere online, if you look hard enough, the fourth of which was so awful I deleted it, and I don’t have a copy of.

The basic plot was ‘the last Dalek story’ – a future Doctor giving a eulogy for the Daleks, who he’d just utterly defeated. The idea was to produce a real capstone for the Doctor Who legend – once the Daleks were beaten, the Doctor announced his retirement.

Two versions had a Doctor played by Ian Richardson, a third had an ancient, wizened Paul McGann, the fourth had Chris Cwej doing the honours. Rebecca Levene didn’t like any of the versions, and insisted the scene got cut, leading to the only real argument we ever had in the five books and two years on Emmerdale we’ve worked together. Five years on, the most annoying thing is admitting that Bex was right.

General comments

And so it ends... ful y aware that people would be flicking to the end to see if the Doctor was alive, the last section is a memorial service in Westminster Abbey with no Doctor to be seen. Lethbridge-Stewart’s musings on his career are the last meta reference of the book, representing the thoughts of the people at Virgin. The last line’s nicely understated, I think – you have to re-read it before you spot that a piece of the Doctor Who universe has changed.

Table of Contents

Chapter Four
Chapter Six
Chapter Ten
Chapter Eleven
Chapter Thirteen
Chapter Fourteen
Chapter Fifteen
Epilogue
Chapter 1
Chapter 2
Chapter 3
Chapter 4
Chapter 5
Chapter 6
Chapter 8
Chapter 9
Chapter 10
Chapter 11
Chapter 12
Chapter 13
Chapter 14
Chapter 15